

REPROGRAMMIN
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THE
PRESIDENT

Charles V Abela

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A 'Thank you' to all my family
and all those who have helped me
with this book

RTPIIFMDM-MFA

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To my grandson in NYC
Denzel Easter

White House Photo - Tabrez Syed on Unsplash
Lincoln Statue Photo - Pexels-Ramaz-Blu-70171

George W. Bush remark in Trenton.
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-community-trenton-new-jersey>

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Character Names

Aaron	Chap. 22	Black Ops
Abba Salam Kasongo	Chap. 10	King of Sukopia
Adam	Chap. 22	Black Ops
Ahmed Hadid	Chap. 20	Palestinian President
Aleksandr Shevchenko	Chap. 14	President of Ukraine
Betty	Chap. 22	Owner of Betty's Diner - Seattle
Bill Plavic	Chap. 11	White House Press Secretary
Carlito	Chap. 06	Son of Maria Ramos
Carlos Mendez	Chap. 23	Owner of 'Restaurant Carlos'
Carmelo Pastucci	Chap. 06	CEO Better Waste Collection Services
Celine Rupentine	Chap. 01	President's Wife
Constantin Kamov	Chap. 06	Director at NIFAI - Mole & Traitor
Daniil Gidinski	Chap. 14	Ukrainian Ambassador to the U.S.
David Levy	Chap. 20	Israeli Prime Minister
Ed Fingerton	Chap. 10	Director of CIA
Frank Albert Rupentine	Chap. 01	President of U.S.
Hank Harrison	Chap. 22	Black Ops - Team Leader
Herman Kraut	Chap. 02	CEO and Founder of NIFAI
Jack Steiner	Chap. 09	Secretary of Defense
Jacko Weiner	Chap. 13	Programming Guru at NIFAI
James McNaught	Chap. 12	President's Chief of Staff
Jeremiah Jackson	Chap. 02	CEO and Founder of NIFAI
Jesse	Chap. 22	Black Ops Second in Command
Jessica	Chap. 02	Secretary to Herman Kraut
Jimmy Calante	Chap. 22	Owner of 'Cyanide Jim Yard'
Jordi Rupentine	Chap. 23	President's son
Kang Song-ho	Chap. 21	South Korean Government Member
Maria Ramos	Chap. 04	Campaign Manager for the President
Maximillian Hungerford	Chap. 18	CEO at IBM
Melina	Chap. 01	Assistant to Dr. Milton Meredith
Milos Puskas	Chap. 13	Pure Maths Scientist at NIFAI
Milton Meredith	Chap. 01	Psychiatrist treating Rupentine

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Character Names “*cont.*”

Ming Song-ho	Chap. 22	North Korean hitman
Nicola di Fermi	Chap. 02	Future Thinker and Founder of NIFAI
Nikita Ivanov	Chap. 23	New Russian President
Nora Carr	Chap. 03	Campaign Director for the President
Penelope Spikes	Chap. 06	Academic at NIFAI
Roy Stennings	Chap. 18	Governor of Nevada
Sid Lawson	Chap. 06	CEO at Lawson Digital
Thomas Brown	Chap. 02	CEO at NIFAI
Tim Koch	Chap. 01	Neurosurgeon
Tom Hawkins	Chap. 09	British Prime Minister
Vladimir Volkov	Chap. 14	Russian President
Walter Charles Ferraro	Chap. 18	New U.S. President after Rupentine
Willie Wilson	Chap. 22	Owner of ‘Vehicle Crushing Yard’
Xiang Xing Ping	Chap. 24	President Republic of China

Useful Terms & Illustrations

DOD	Chap. 08	Department of Defense
ISRAEL – PALESTINE MAP	Chap. 19	Recommended Infrastructure
M.D.A.	Chap. 10	Melt Down Agent Weapon
NIFAI	Chap. 02	Nevada Institute For Artificial Intelligence
SHIM	Chap. 03	Speech Hearing Input Monitor Chip
SLBM	Chap. 15	Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile

REPROGRAMMING THE PRESIDENT

INTRODUCTION

Bipolar President. Never expects the worst – always gets the best.

The Year 2022. Rupentine aspires to the Highest Office in the Land and dreams of healing the American divide; purge it of foreign influence; and reverse Climate Change. *To do this, he must forever and always fight the inner demons he inherited at birth.*

He is recovering in a Surgical Unit of an Institution in a place that has never been heard of, has never been seen and has never been spotted - not even by the ever-present spy satellites.

Unknowingly of its Modus Operandi, the U.S. Government has a substantial investment in this organization for the supply of A.I. Chips that may or may never be delivered.

This unheard-of city-like institute harbors a much higher motive though. Its main objective is to change the political scene in the United States and re-establish its supremacy in the world.

Exhaustive and innovative high-tech diplomacy is exhibited by the U.S. President. The results shake the established world order. The will to use the latest weaponry – only available to *the*

REPROGRAMMING THE PRESIDENT

traditional allies – effectively turns the world on its head.

Rupentine's charisma and his own inherent negotiation skills provide him with an even higher platform in his quest for world diplomacy.



Charles V Abela

The CREST of **NIFAI**

Chapter 01

Frank Rupentine is in surgery.

1

THE MYSTERY TOUR is not entirely unexpected. There is a knock on Celine Rupentine's front door. It is February 26, 2022, a day certainly long to live in her memory.

Two men dressed in black show their credentials and then escort her to the waiting dark gray Chrysler sedan. The FBI wouldn't have warned her, neither would the CIA or any other Government high-profile undercover institution.

She starts to feel somewhat nervous. From her house they drive to Reno Airport where Mrs. Rupentine boards a light twin-engine plane accompanied by her guardians.

They fly North East towards Gerlach, a little township about 50 miles off the

Black Rock Desert, Nevada, to an unidentified locality.

The aircraft comes to a gentle stop on a small nondescript airstrip in the middle of an uninhabited area pretty much barren of everything - except for kangaroo rats, horned lizards, and rattlesnakes.

The airstrip is effectively fenced in and sealed off to vehicles. A guard stands at the gate watching over the only entry and seemingly the only exit point for passengers arriving or departing.

Judging by the signs and general feeling of the place it must have been one of a handful of top-secret unpublicized establishments run by the U.S. Government - particularly in this part of the Country. It felt kind of eerie.

For many people, the mention of Nevada makes their minds switch to Area-51 and all the controversies and mysteries that surround it. Could Frank be involved in some kind of a conspiracy which would soon engulf her too?

Now, the steps of the aircraft drop down smoothly.

Celine Rupentine is fiftyish, elegant and is wearing black. She has stylish hair, is well-kept and looks fit as she steps out of

the plane and climbs into the back of a dark-colored SUV. Accompanying her are the two men who have been with her since the time she left her house in Lake Tahoe.

An officer sits next to Celine. Mysteriously, the daylight inside the SUV changes smoothly to almost complete darkness.

"The gradual change in daylight is a unique innovation in this car," says the officer. "It helps us to keep cool; also, keeps the route to our destination secret."

"It's a complete change from the arid desert! I see, the car also self-navigates," says Celine.

"That's right, it knows its way around. Not long ma'am."

"Where are we?"

"Five hundred feet below the ground in Nevada. Just about there now."

The car brings itself to a complete halt exactly within the predetermined electronically-sensitive markings on the ground.

Celine steps out of the car and meets Melina.

"Mrs. Rupentine, my name is Melina.

Welcome to the NIFAI Complex. This is the Surgical Procedures Unit. I'm Dr. Meredith's assistant."

Celine walks into the office accompanied by Melina. Dr. Milton Meredith, is in his mid-fifties. He walks from behind his desk and introduces himself.

"Mrs. Rupentine, I am Dr. Milton Meredith. Please call me Milton. As you can see it always seems to be nighttime here. How are you?"

"Fine thanks. How is he? When can I see him? And where are we?" asks Celine.

"He is recovering well and you can see him tomorrow. We are in Nevada but this complex cannot be seen from above the ground and it has no apparent entry or exit points."

"Secretive! What's he in here for?"

"Severe bipolar disorder. He has always been concerned between doing what is right, what appears to be right, avoids what is wrong and what appears to be wrong."

"Perfectly fine for his architectural profession."

"He insisted on running for public

office,” replies Milton.

“I specifically told him, not to.”

“He is gifted with intelligence well above that of the average person. Surprisingly, this condition presents Frank with benefits.”

“Is his condition fixed now? And what benefits?”

“It is fixed. He can be very successful as Governor of Nevada and beyond.”

“Meaning?”

“We can help Frank run for higher office. President of the United States. It is up to you and Frank to decide to carry such a burden.”

“You must be joking, I am not having any of this. Please get me out of this hole and I will see him at home. And the surgery? What happened?”

“Simply... an intelligent plate was inserted in his head. It stabilizes his thinking, emotions and his behavior. He will be able to swing with the mood of the nation.”

“You are going to manipulate him, aren’t you?”

“Nothing like that. Please sit down.

Would you like a drink?"

"No thank you."

"He would set his own agenda for the betterment of this Country," replies Milton. "He wants to turn his own world and our world upside down – for the betterment. You will be able to discuss this in two days' time."

"Hold on, Doctor. I just don't believe this. What can Frank do that other politicians cannot do? What has changed?"

"America has changed. It is divided. Frank will have the willpower to move forward, take tough decisions without alienating half of the electorate."

"A simple plate transforms him into a superstar! Are you kidding me?"

"No, I am not. He has his own Unique Selling Proposition, very unique indeed."

"I am not following."

"With this Institute's guidance he will succeed... not only to become President, but one of the best that America would have ever had."

"What Institute are you talking about?"

Dr. Meredith sits down and brings his

chair closer to Celine's.

"I cannot say a lot. It is all Government privileged information. At birth, Frank inherited a bipolar disorder but at the same time he was gifted with certain keys - from day one. We merely synchronize those keys with the lock."

Celine ponders on what Milton had said and then replies. "Doctor, I will stay and expect to see him soon."

"Please rest well tonight and you will be able to see Frank briefly tomorrow," replies Milton. "Anything you need, just press the buzzer."

Celine gets up the next morning, has a quick shower, fixes herself a light breakfast and feels ready for the big day of decisions. She presses the buzzer and soon Melina shows up and escorts her to the office.

"Good morning Mrs. Rupentine," says Milton with a welcoming smile. "Frank is up and back to his normal self. No pain. He is fully aware of the surgical procedure and the possibilities it has opened for him. But the presidency was never discussed."

"Okay Doctor, point the way please."

"Well, talk to him and float the idea. If

yes, secrecy will be required and you will need to sign some papers, and that would be it.”

Celine tiptoes into the Recovery Room. Frank Rupentine is in his mid-fifties, six feet tall and is sitting on the edge of the bed. He gets up slowly, then they kiss and embrace.

“Hello Frank, how are you feeling, darling?”

“Hundred percent, if not better, my thinking is clearer and I have a stronger sense of purpose. I can already see a definite path forward. and I really feel that inside me.”

“Frank, architecture is the best way forward!”

“No, no. None of that. I want to run again; Governor of Nevada. I am determined to overcome all obstacles inherited at birth. This time I have a plan, I will follow it and I will win.”

He pauses for a moment and then continues, “Nevada or bust. It is a start.”

“I have been against this for a long time. It’s not getting you anywhere and your medical condition is your main adversary. You just cannot please everybody at the same time. No politician

can, but you are already handicapped in that respect. Did you volunteer for this?"

"I wanted to clear all the cobwebs so I could move on. It is a monumental task to make an impact."

"That is exactly my point. Becoming the Governor of Nevada will certainly not change it. It would make just a tiny ripple."

Frank is adamant and continues, "Maybe California. That cruel headline in the Nevada newspaper really did hurt at the time and it still does today. I will never forget it - *Rupentine cannot sell a bottle of Coke to a man dying of thirst in the desert.*"

"You had a number of unflattering headlines and critiques but that one about the 'bottle of Coke' certainly takes a beating. It was not only cruel but vicious. Frank, why do you want to torture yourself even further. Anyway, Dr. Meredith says their studies indicate a positive outcome. So if you want to run for Governor, I cannot stop you."

"Celine, I am glad to have you on board."

"Nobody discussed this in more detail?"

"No. Why do you ask like that?"

"I am curious," replies Celine, "they tell me they can help you go further... much further. Unlimited Power."

"What? With an inherited medical condition and a disadvantage like my father's? President? A joke."

"That's what I think too."

Frank stops for a while and then, as if with a sudden change of mind he continues, "But I will give it some thought overnight. I can see a full agenda. Just think of the possibilities. Power?"

"Unlimited," adds Celine.

"A two-term job."

"Now you're talking big. Will you be able to handle it?"

"Stay with me - I have a secret weapon to do all that. It's been in my armory for a while. Suddenly I am getting a better picture of it, and I will unleash it, if given the opportunity."

"It seems that there is nothing much more that I can do. Call Dr. Meredith and inform him of your decision. I will be staying here for another day."

Frank presses the buzzer. Melina shows up promptly and escorts Celine to her private room.

Dr. Tim Koch is Rupentine's neurosurgeon - Frank being his very special patient. He never had such a VIP under his care. He walks into the room followed by Dr. Meredith.

"How's your head feeling this morning?"

"Really good."

Dr. Koch proceeds with the usual check-up and soon gives the sign that all is good.

"All is fine. I will now leave you in Dr. Meredith's hands. You're ready to take on the world."

"I might just do that. Celine has explained and I am happy to accept."

Meredith answers promptly, "Both of you will need to sign papers. If you decide to run you must never disclose any of the surgical procedures carried out here. Not until you're past your last breath."

"Any further treatment?"

"None anticipated," replies Milton.

"What's next?"

"Celine will soon see you with the papers. You will need to sign. That's both of you," replies Milton while pressing the

buzzer. "Further discussions will continue after that."

IT IS FEBRUARY 28th, 2022. Celine walks into the Recovery Room, signs a bunch of confidential papers and wishes Frank well. The first part of a long mission has just been completed. Dr. Meredith accompanies Celine out of the room but she has a question that seems to be constantly at the forefront of her mind.

"One last question please. When was this Institute... started?"

"Mrs. Rupentine, that explanation is beyond the scope of this visit. You have to excuse me, really. I am not being rude but I do have some urgent things on my mind. Frank will be able to fill you in on this matter."

"Doctor, I must insist on this. He does not know half the story. And I know nothing about this. You must let me understand about this mysterious place, how it came about, was it a secret sect, an underground organisation...?"

Meredith stands motionless, his face blank of expression, his eyes stop making contact and looks at the ground.

"Doctor, you must let me in on this, it will affect him, me and the people of

America... as you put it.”

Meredith breathes in a sigh of relief, his eyes widen and looks at Celine. “Okay, you make a point. Briefly, the idea kicked off about 4 years ago. It was the pet project of a futuristic thinker from New York... a young brilliant boy born in Naples, Italy, who came to America with his parents at a young age.”

Chapter 02

Mysterious NIFAI. Where and what is it? The Founders.

2

The most renowned volcano on the planet is probably Mount Vesuvius - beautiful yet equally destructive.

Nicola di Fermi spent his childhood days living in the shadows of this majestic beauty about 9 miles from his native Naples. To him it symbolized power often dished out with disastrous effects but equally with something beneficial to show at the end. Notable are the vineyards on the rich and fertile slopes covered with volcanic ash and the end product, one of Italy's best-known wines - Lacrima Christi.

As a little kid he was constantly adored by his mother - Mamma Maria. He was her only child and she was very conscious of his intellectual capabilities. They ran deep on his father's side - a family many

of whom were high achievers in engineering and architecture. A healthy number of them however followed the popular path to priesthood.

Nicola never showed any great religious enthusiasm of any sort although he never missed Sunday Mass and always accompanied by his parents. He was always intellectually explosive, full of energy and ideas.

He used to say to his mother in Italian *'Mamma c'è un fuoco dentro di me. Ma non lo capisco.'* Translated, 'there is a fire inside of me, but I do not understand it.' His mother used to call him *'Il mio piccolo Vesuvio'* and she understood well what was going on inside his head.

His father Angelo could hardly make a decent living tending a few acres of tomato plants on the often dry and parched land – acreage which had been in the family for generations.

But both parents put their son's priorities ahead of their love for their cherished Naples. They decided to say goodbye to the land they loved and migrated to the land of hope – America, the refuge and inspiration for millions of Italians who ended up doing very well for themselves.

Nicola left the constant bubbling molten lava of the Vesuvius behind but certainly kept its own replica inside him.

He cultivated his education in many a New York and Connecticut institution including Yale and pursued further studies at MIT. His parents passed when he was about 40 but by now, he was a fully qualified engineer and a physicist. Nicola transformed himself into a renowned future thinker making most of his money from registered patents, giving lectures to corporate heads and writing books about lateral thinking. He professed to having been often inspired by Dr. Edward de Bono.

Nicola used to tell his wife Peppina, a native New Yorker, about his boyhood days dreaming of walking along the Campanian Volcanic Arc, and reaching the top of the volcano if not physically but certainly in spirit.

Peppina always listened attentively to his monologues but could never fathom out the complexity of thought behind them. Her contribution was always minimal with the occasional nod of the head. Unfortunately, she was barren of kids, so her attention was centered on Nicola.

NOT FAR FROM where Nicola lives, in the Upper West Side, Herman Kraut spends most of his hours locked on the 54th Floor of the TSM Building. The name on the building projects Kraut's power as a media tycoon at the helm of Tectonic Shift Media. He is the company's founder and CEO. His ambition is to go head-to-head with CNN, deliberately dropping Fox News off his radar for being too far out to the Right.

The University he attended however, bestowed far more credit on his intellectual capabilities than what really was in his armory. This is very true of many great business leaders who build their power base just by keeping their noses close to the ground and a healthy distance away from the intellectual pages which would normally pave the way to academia.

Money talks, everyone else walks. A true guiding principle of many business people and even Presidents. That was his father's motto and now it is the well-founded principle guiding Herman. Many of his colleagues are of the belief that he harbors presidential ambitions but he is not quite there as yet, perhaps he lacks the final thrust.

Tall, mid-fifties and always dressed ready to kill, his attire being no less than the best Italian fashion on display. Evident by his Canali suits and a sleek dark colored Lamborghini for his daily ride which graces the TSM parking lot for at least ten hours a day.

Happily married, or appears to be, yet his wife goes on about her private life in a very private way. Mysterious calls register at least once a week and messages understood to be 'For Your Eyes Only' are exclusively left with Jessica. The message, always with the contact number missing, was normally placed at the bottom of the message pile as per Herman's instructions.

He keeps away from rich Italian fine food keeping his waistline in focus. One has to be 100% fit if one is to fight his way to the top in the cable news war.

He spends time pounding his treadmill and other gym exercise equipment, reminiscent of Gordon Gekko going through his daily exercises while fleecing companies of millions of dollars.

His exercise routine is not to the same extremes as Gordon's. However, often Jessica needs to come in and hold the latest reports on News Ratings, Cable

Network Performance or Social Media trends while he reads and thumps the machine increasing the tempo when he needs her to turn over to a new page.

Jessica often finds this chore to be intimidating, boring, intriguing and frustrating. He continues to flex his muscles and at the same time runs his eyes at the reports that she patiently holds up leaving her nothing else better to do to kill the time. So, she often finds herself running her eyes below his torso admiring his muscular legs which are normally covered appropriately for the performances. She takes as much time to recover her composure when she walks out of his office as he does to get his breath back to normal.

Twice a week he skips his regimen, the reason being he would be waiting for important guests or business associates to visit.

Today it was one of those days.

He looks at his watch and figures Jeremiah Jackson Jr. would be making his presence felt soon. He has enough time to make a couple of calls in search of securing a business venture to expand his cable news network along the East Coast as far as Florida ... all part of his overall

strategy.

He has it all planned in his head but he is still patiently looking and waiting for the perfect vehicle to get him there. Would it be a yacht, a private jet or a rocket? Herman's firm belief was simple – control the media, control the message, control just about everything else.

NEGOTIATING THE CROWDED Manhattan Streets is a breeze for the superbly fit Jeremiah. At 6 feet 8 inches with a shaven head, most people get out of the way if he is seen approaching, if nothing else but to get a better and more comfortable look at him. They often look at him and guess ... 'is that Shaquille?' Certainly, not as well-known as *the* famous star, but definitely an icon in his native Chicago.

He is the founder and owner of Ultimate American Sports Franchisors. Very bright but never had the time or patience to sit behind desks pen in hand or listening to the monotone of somebody teaching something that he had absolutely no interest in.

However, he does possess a great business acumen. He knows a bargain when he sees one. Jeremiah's calling was that of an athlete and he made his name playing for the Chicago Cats, a basketball

team which he ultimately bought and still uses to this day to continue his trajectory to success.

When asked indirectly what spurred his success or what studies he excelled at, people were often baffled when he answers, 'It was HK University'. 'You mean Hong Kong University?' 'No, Hard Knocks University.' Smart and sharp.

He thinks of his father as somebody who tried hard but unfortunately failed as a sports personality forcing his old man to take a job as a middle manager in the Post Office.

The area of Chicago he grew up in was not the best, a scene reminiscent of 'Apocalypse Now', with broken down cars, walls covered in graffiti, derelict buildings and paupers on the pavement trying to stay alive from one day to the next.

On occasions he rushes to help homeless men lying dormant on the pavement, tries to check their pulse but finds they are as stiff as can be imagined. So he does the only appropriate thing he could muster. He would take his jacket off and cover the face of the man he would be leaning over at that time - one of those unfortunates whose suffering finally came to an end, and passed away during a cold

and freezing night in Chicago.

It happens to be his only good jacket, so after the ambulance services leave, he duly goes to the nearby laundry and as always, he is rendered the service for no money exchanged. Such scenes are still present in his mind as they were twenty years ago.

These memories helped form his character.

Such recollections fuel him with enthusiasm to use any success he might have in the future to help people in his own community and in other disadvantaged groups.

He enters the TSM Building, walks to the elevator, presses call button 54 and emerges in Kraut's Office Reception. Still with his cell phone on his ear, he acknowledges Jessica who waives him straight in to Herman's Office.

Herman is finishing off a phone call to his General Manager. "So, we're all clear, our objective is singular. To identify the new President-to-be who echoes a balanced political view. Let's get to work."

Jeremiah himself was just finishing his own call. "Contract on your desk

tomorrow. I'm walking into a meeting right now, I have to say goodbye... Herman, apologies, I had to take that call. A new venture in Lake Tahoe."

"Hey JJ, you're looking great."

"Herman, your office exudes power. Similar to the Oval Office in appearance. You must have planned this with great care and thought. Yes, no? Okay, no answer, so back to business, you put one hundred fifty million in this project, what's in it for you?"

Herman walks to one of the large windows and observes all the sharp spikes of Manhattan coming out of the ground. He looks at his perfectly manicured self in the reflection, adjusts his tie and collar and without looking at JJ he continues...

"No political ambition. My strategy is simple. I need all ingredients to give this company power. Ultimately, more than that of the Presidency. You control the media, you control the message. However, it does not deliver the same prestige."

"Does that bother you?"

Still looking at the Manhattan cityscape he continues, "I keep looking at these spikes coming out of the ground. They are like rockets, similar to one in the picture

on the wall. Smoking and ready to take off.”

“So, which one are you going to ride on and where to,” replies Jeremiah.

He could not mask his ambition so he continues with his back to JJ. “In other words fly me to the moon ...”

“... You want to be amongst the stars and check what it’s like on Jupiter and Mars,” adds JJ.

“Excellent line. Well put.” Herman ponders and looks at the floor.

A gentle knock on the door and Nicola di Fermi wheels himself in and parks his chair across from Herman’s desk. He is not in the best of health. Now aged 82, the wheelchair has been his means of transport for the last three years.

“Nicola, we are honored. The greatest lateral thinker in the U.S.”

“Thank you, Herman. Gentlemen, you have to excuse me but my health does not allow me to talk for long so I will be brief and you must read between the lines quickly. Your task will be to put the best person in the Oval Office – one who shares our vision. You determine his agenda and keep him in office for two terms – at least.”

Nicola takes a sip of water.

“Our motto is Sumus Omnes Pares. Latin. We are all equal.”

Jerimiah politely interrupts, “Nicola, that is a very powerful statement.”

“America is divided and the world is burning. We will help elect the President who will deliver on the issues that really matter. Climate Change, Equality, and Restoration of American Power. How? You have put \$300 million. I put my ten, the Government \$310 million. That is a total of 620 million.”

“How is the government involved?” asks Herman.

“Remember, I have met three past presidents. They believe me and respect me. That’s how I got the money without too many questions asked. They have faith in me and about the well-being of this Country. Excuse me. The bathroom?”

“The one on the right is more suited. Opens automatically. All high-tech.”

Herman looks at Jeremiah. “What about you, JJ? Are you in it for glory?”

“Purely altruistic. It’s a big divide. Memories from the time I was a ‘Jeremiah nobody’ still haunt me.”

Nicola wheels himself back in.

"So, Nicola, what happens with this \$620 million?"

"It will establish the Nevada Institute For Artificial Intelligence - NIFAI. Government Land under the Black Rock Desert in Nevada has been gifted to us. All subterranean construction. It will manufacture the world's most powerful Artificial Intelligence Chips."

Nicola takes another sip of water.

"Chips will be sold to the Military - that revenue will fund research into human intelligence and the production of A.I. Chips." He continues...

"Human intelligence, human experimentation and A.I. Chips for the Military. The most advanced Chip would be engineered for the Candidate."

Jeremiah looks at Herman with a look of concern.

"How is the Chip controlled?"

"NIFAI technicians will control the process. Secrecy is paramount. All personnel must be third-generation Americans at minimum. European extraction. The End Justifies The Means. Remember that line. Are we all on

board?”

Both nod approval.

“The next step?” asks Herman.

“Your money is deposited in a Swiss Bank Account. You are the proud Founders of NIFAI. You work out the plan, hire the personnel and get the construction moving.”

The NIFAI complex was officially opened in 2020. Dr. Thomas Brown is in his late-fifties, a bit on the short side, just about 5 feet 5 inches tall. He is the CEO and is assisted by other directors, one of them is Dr. Milton Meredith. They take their instructions from Jackson and Kraut who jointly monitor and direct the behavioral pattern of the chosen presidential candidate. NIFAI is driven by a hub of three Supercomputers working in tandem, yet equally capable of executing all the required tasks independently should either one or two computers malfunction. The hub is known as Trinitas.

Chapter 03

Strategy to elect a President.

3

Back to the present, April 3rd, 2022. Jeremiah, Dr. Milton Meredith and Thomas Brown join Herman Kraut on the 54th Floor to discuss the presidential candidate.

Herman reads a summary of Rupentine's bio.

"Frank Albert Rupentine, 55, born in Reno, Nevada, married, wife Celine, lives in Lake Tahoe, own house, graduated from Caltech - Architect, spent time in the UK and Australia. Ran for Governor of Nevada, failed, bipolar symptoms. Environmentalist. What else, Milton?"

"Dynamite. Treated him in my Lake Tahoe Clinic. Erratic behavior but intelligent, flexible, listens to advice. Likes to please both sides. It is the main

obstacle he faces. Obsessed with keeping Planet Earth green, uses the youth movement in America for Climate Change. I think he should cut it."

"Environmental outlook and youth. A powerful dual dynamic that will make him a winner - Guaranteed," adds Jeremiah.

Thomas Brown chips in, "We can program him left, right or center. The A.I. Chip ensures that no further surgical intervention will be required over an eight- year stint."

Milton continues, "We can tweak his behavior on any concern. Make him aggressive, placid, act like Satan or like a Saint, 24/7. In the Oval Office, on a toilet seat or while holding the nuclear football on Air Force One."

"The package has a broad range of phobia pattern adjustments and corrections. It is ready for implementation," says Thomas Brown.

"How do we communicate as to what we need?" asks Jeremiah.

"Use this Form, pass it to Thomas, then it comes to me," replies Milton.

Thomas Brown adds, "I will check for technical problems. And bingo, the candidate will feel the immediate benefit.

Then in and out of the Praesidis Trinitas. Latin for Presidential Three Computers in One."

"My TSM network will set up programs promoting the Message, not the President, but it will mirror exactly the candidate's agenda. That's the Law."

Jeremiah remarks, "We will continue on a Green Earth and Climate Change agenda, constantly driven by the Youth of America. A Super Pac brings in unlimited funds. The Law states that plane charter must be paid for. Profits will be ploughed back into the Pac."

Herman agrees, "We cannot go wrong but we need a Campaign Director who excels at Funding. I will see you out."

A VIRTUAL MEETING is in place. It follows from the previous day. They use Thomas Brown's secure system.

"Milton, any prominent changes in the behavioral pattern since surgery?" enquires Herman.

"No ill effects, some continued treatment for a few weeks, but no further surgery."

"How quick will we see the results when we request a change?" asks Jeremiah.

“24 hours max, instantaneous, once we perfect the software. Behavioral change will be shown on my monitor and Rupentine will re-act quickly to any signal. Results will reach you only via this secure link,” replies Milton.

“We will get back to you when we start using the Form. Logging off for now. Bye.”

Jeremiah paces the floor in his office, cell phone on his left ear. He stops by one of the many windows and peers outside at the Chicago streetscape. He softly swings a golf club along the floor and gently pushes the ball in a zig zag pattern while waiting for the call to be answered.

“This is Thomas Brown, how are you, JJ?”

“Good. We agreed on our marketing message. And the need to push Rupentine to the political center.”

“And his own presidential campaign message?”

“His campaign director will do that. Herman has Nora Carr in mind. Her details coming to you for a NIFAI clearance check. Any friends in the J. Edgar Hoover building?” asks Jeremiah.

“I have friends everywhere, JJ. The answer with you within an hour.” True to

his word, the response was fast and all news was good.

Jeremiah relaxes at his desk with the cell phone on his ear as he spins a basketball and reflects on the big task ahead. This time he waits for Herman Kraut to answer.

Herman pounds his treadmill and answers the call, "Yes, JJ. Getting old too fast, I feel breathless on this machine."

"You will be fine Herman. Plenty of time to take over the world. Thomas Brown called and confirmed that Nora Carr is A-OK."

"Great, I have a way to reel her in."

"Good luck. I got my own guy on the Youth marketing program."

"Plastics is a worry, JJ. Manufacturing needs to be done in the U.S. We should open huge tracts of land in Texas. And get labor from the South."

"Good thinking Herman."

"We need to keep prices down and help their economies. This goes hand-in-hand with you wanting to help lots of ethnic groups."

"Our commitment, marketing, money and Trinitas - mark my words, we cannot

lose. But should the Trinitas Computers pick an internal fight, there's no DEFCON 3, DEFCON 2 or DEFCON 1. Boom! God Help us all."

A few days later Herman visits Jeremiah's Chicago office. The intention is to bolt down the marketing strategy for electing the new President. However, from a legal point of view, the most important point is to keep the plan completely separate from the political one. The political programme is the domain of the Campaign Director.

It simply means no cross-over of campaign funds, thus avoiding getting embroiled in legal cases and throwing the whole presidential program out of the window.

Jerimiah, as always in a playful mood before a meeting, lifts Herman Kraut two feet up in the air. It enables Herman to sink the ball down the Mini Basketball Hoop. The phone rings and Jeremiah promptly answers.

"Yes Thomas."

"Hi JJ, Milton Meredith will talk to Rupentine to instill urgency in his agenda."

Herman butts in, "Nora Carr will push

him to the Center and he will run as a Democrat.”

“Herman, tell me about Nora Carr,” asks Thomas.

“Lawyer; 54; Fit; Semi-retired. Two teenagers. Successful Campaign Manager for Zach Lieberman, two-term Senator, Libertarian. Takes no prisoners. Expert Fund Raiser. And carries a nervous twitch. A sudden shake from left to right. Should be fun. A bit of a distraction at times, though. If there’s nothing else to discuss, we’ll continue with our marketing here.”

Herman admires a huge mural of Jeremiah in action while he continues the conversation.

“We’ll get Rupentine on one of our shows, JJ. We will advertise it well and get Nora’s attention. Then we’ll get them to meet. Hopefully, they will like each other, although I do have some doubts.”

Jeremiah picks his phone. It’s Thomas Brown again.

“JJ, soon we’ll have a new scary Chip and we will be able to instruct Rupentine what to say word-for-word in real time.”

“Meaning.”

“Potentially explosive. We call it Speech Hearing Input Monitoring Chip. SHIM for short, like in shimmering. It is not a replacement Chip, but effectively an upgrade to the current software. I will leave you with that thought. Okay get back to work.”

Jeremiah continues, “Let’s wrap up the main points, Herman. TSM show will feature Rupentine. You will reel in Nora. We work on the ‘Message’ marketing tactics. SHIM Chip will be ready soon. Done.”

NICOLA SITS IN his wheelchair. He feels unwell. He tries hard to read the correct dollar balances off the latest bank statements. He calls Jeremiah.

“Yes, Nicola.”

“Just a quick thought, JJ. Contributions stand at \$143 million. You will get the Swiss Bank Account details. If something happens to me, you will run a joint account. I suggest you take charge when it happens, swap at a later stage. I feel really bad so I have to say bye for now.”

HERMAN IS IN a meeting with the TSM marketing director, Jason Ronin and other marketing staff.

“I want a marketing campaign based on

the Message Agenda - Climate Change. Aim primarily at the Connecticut Area. We need to attract the attention of Nora Carr and draw her out."

"And then what?" asks Jason Ronin.

"We will get her to attend the show with the Presidential Contender and hopefully they will see eye-to-eye."

"He has to have fast-moving eyes, Herman."

"Why do you say that?"

"I used to cover the Connecticut area when she was running the Zach Liebermann show. She is a tough cookie. Her staff tend to march in and march out. Tough bitch. They call her Bitch with a Twitch. You have to have fast eyes to catch the twitch when it happens."

"Yes Jonas, aka Rapper Brown, what do you have, something amusing judging by your smile, I guess."

"Name is Jonas, surname's Brown, let's go visit ..."

"Jonas, stop stop stop. What in fuck's sake is this. We are trying to find a candidate to elect as President who probably has no musical talent whatsoever and more than that, he or she

wouldn't care. On top, we're trying to get him a money-grabbing talented lady who lays it bare ... oops, I mean, 'My way or the Highway'. I meant her intentions not her wares."

Jonas speaks out again, "we were trying to have some fun Mr. Kraut. Bit of relaxation. I am at fault, not the group. They kind of liked a bit of rap."

"Fuck the fun. Well look, I liked it too but I cannot say that I condone this behavior. Excuse my grin. Okay we'll try rapping when we hook her in ... I mean we get her on Rupentine's books."

"You should try that more often boss, you have talent in that area too," says Jonas.

"Okay let's break it up. I expect that artwork from you Jason in the next couple of days. Jonas, prepare a rap for the opening night performed by you and your team of rappers. This could be your big break in show business. The theme is Climate Change."

Chapter 04

Rupentine – Presidential contender on Cable TV.

4

Frank and Celine enjoy breakfast at their Lake Tahoe home. As usual though, Frank wipes his mouth clean while Celine is only half-way through her food. The phone rings and he answers without delay. It is Milton Meredith.

“Doctor, how are you? We’re having some breakfast.”

“Call me when you’re alone.”

“I will call you in five.”

Frank smiles apologetically and Celine promptly leaves the room. He returns Milton’s call.

“Anything you want to discuss? Health? Campaign? Other issues?”

“Not really, but happy to come and see you.”

“My clinic tomorrow morning, ten?”

“Tomorrow. See you then,” says Rupentine.

Frank Rupentine knocks on the door and enters.

“You’re looking well,” says Milton.

“I am feeling hundred percent.”

“Frank, how are you doing with the Campaign Director, mental strength, how are you holding up?”

“My vision for the future is clear. Four things on my mind. Marketing, campaign strategy, funding, and TV shows. And I don’t have any conflicts. They are all of equal importance.”

“Excellent. Maria Ramos performed very well in the past for you Frank, but you understand – she is a lightweight.”

“I agree, anyway I had an offer to appear on CNN. October 28th. They want to sound off my thinking. Green Earth, Save the World policy – Climate Change.”

“Hold back, Frank. There is only one time to make a first impression. Campaign Director – we most surely can help.”

“I will call Herman Kraut, the CEO at TSM network in New York City and a

personal friend of mine. Their agenda runs in parallel with yours and you don't have to duck 'n weave, let me try him."

Herman promptly answers the phone. "Milton, how's things? By yourself?"

"No. The next President of the United States is sitting right across from me. Perfect for TSM. Guess who it might be?"

"Local philanthropist? Nevada mayor?"

"Politician – Frank Rupentine."

"I know of him. Failed Governor, he believes in a good cause, not running again, is he?"

"Herman, he is a guaranteed winner on your show. He's booked on CNN for October 28th. He wants a large audience."

"Quality not quantity. They will chew him up and spit him out on CNN. We'll book him here. Text me his number. Bye."

As soon as he ended the call Herman calls Jason and instructs him to set the TV show for early October.

APRIL 1st, 2022. Celine prepares breakfast. Unusual for Frank, he stays away and Celine wonders why. She calls him but there is no response. She tiptoes to the bedroom.

“Frank, breakfast is ready. What’s wrong?”

Frank is incoherent but he parrots some scenes from the past.

“... the sound of a didgeridoo in the distance. There are native Australians in war paint.”

“It’s the first of April today, Honey,” says Celine.

But Frank continues, “I am in my shorts with a cork hat on. I pick litter. Hot, dry, and serene. Kookaburras on branches laugh. A koala bear stares at me.”

Then he stops, stares into the distance and continues.

“California? Nevada? I don’t know. In my hand I am holding architectural drawings. I wander from one spot to the other. It must be Nevada.”

He stops and takes a deep breath, then heaves and starts sweating.

“Whereabouts in Nevada?”

He continues in short snappy sentences, “Area 51. Underground. Hospital. Aliens... My vision comes and goes... Five of them. Small, gentle, kind. All stare at me, their faces now get down close to mine, the first one examines me

closely, then a second, all of them one after the other. All I can see are large slanted eyes in green heads. Their body colour changes to yellow, their eyes get smaller, and they look taller now. But they don't look aliens. Not our own people. All look Chinese. I walk for days. All the people seem strange, they are from other countries. Not friendly."

"Frank, Frank. Are you okay?"

"I am still collecting rubbish, more organized, now our own kids. They all look locals. Each carrying a bag on their back..."

"Snap out of it, Frank."

"A boy approaches me with a newspaper cutting in his hand. 'Failed Governor of Nevada now seeks High Office.' My mission."

Frank rolls his eyes uncontrollably, shakes himself and snaps out of his trance.

"What time is it? Where am I?"

"Next to your wife, Honey."

"I need to sleep."

Celine walks out of the room and calls Dr. Meredith.

“Doctor, Frank went into a trance. He starts with Australia and finishes in Nevada; it’s about Aliens and cleaning the world.”

“Don’t worry. It was expected. What else did he say?”

“A newspaper cutting. ‘Failed governor running for higher office; My mission’ and then he went back to bed.”

“Trust me Celine, I know what it is. I will talk to you later. Just don’t worry.”

MARIA RAMOS IS the Nevada campaign manager. She is in her early thirties, Mexican origin, shapely and dresses well. She walks into Frank’s office.

“Good news, Maria?” asks Frank.

“Better be, Frank. Save Our World... S.O.W. message is gaining momentum. First CNN, now FOX and CBS. Few corporates want to join. You got a piece in the New York Times too.”

“You will play a big role on the West Coast, likewise on the East. Our next big show is on TSM.”

Today, there is great anticipation amongst all staff in the TSM building in New York City. It’s the big show. Literally, the fortunes of the TSM Network and

those of a potential presidential candidate are intertwined and iron-clad. It is October 14th, 2022. Herman has as much of a big investment in the success of this show as does Frank Rupentine.

Dr. Milton Meredith and Thomas Brown set up their offices on the 52nd Floor of this building - thanks to the host, Herman Kraut.

But if their monitoring falters, all will collapse like a house of cards. Rupentine's selling personality, at this early stage of the campaign, even before he declares himself as a potential candidate, needs to be nothing short of stellar. It is their task to tweak all the behavioral changes that keep Frank in the correct orbital pattern.

Herman Kraut's cash outlay of \$150 million would soon launch the man to take the lead position as the presidential candidate for the upcoming 2024 election. Hopefully, Frank's performance would transform into the expected ratings spike. That would put TSM on a fresh cable news trajectory.

Meredith's office is abuzz with high-tech monitoring equipment standard to the unprofessional eye but in reality, much more sophisticated. All linked via special non-terrestrial lines to the main

computer center in Nevada where the Trinitas Computer Hub monitors Frank's performance on stage second-by-second and if necessary, adjusts his demeanor.

Frank paces impatiently and looks out of the window from another office on the 52nd Floor.

The hot-line between Frank and Milton Meredith rings.

"Hi Frank, Milton. A secret between our teams - we are on the same floor, on opposite sides, just above the auditorium. Your speech ready?"

"I am surrounded by paper. Maria and one of her girls are going over the draft again. How's the needle."

"Showing normal here. All good, so I better let you get on with it. Bye for now."

"Maria, have you got the opening thunder? The first lines better be good."

"I am sure your National Director..."

Frank is staring at the outside, "... No need for smartass comments at this time. How high am I here?"

"High enough. Don't be stupid, Frank. If you gonna lead the nation, you need to be calmer, here's the first page. I have been through six edits already."

Frank reads through the page and then continues, "Not going to cut it. Other ideas?"

Milton Meredith rings again and Frank picks his cell.

"What are you doing, Frank. Your needle is shooting up."

Frank Rupentine continues to gaze at the streets below.

"Staring at the abyss, Jesus, I need some medicine, I need something to calm me down, *now*."

"Put Maria on." Maria grabs the cell.

"Hi Maria, in the bathroom, look for pills marked 'CMD' for 'Calm me Down'. Give him one now, and one at six o'clock on the dot."

Maria walks to the bathroom, fetches the pill and hands it to Frank with a glass of water.

"Here, pop this in, calms you down."

"Continue with the draft, take your time, let me think laterally."

He calms down, closes his eyes and relaxes in his chair. Then he thumps his fist on the desk, and loudly proclaims.

"I got it. Write these two words at the

top of the script. 'Ear' and 'Yeeeeeeeah.' And leave the rest to me."

"Boom! That's my Frank," roars Maria.

IN THE AUDITORIUM the screen at the back of the stage shows various shots, themes and two main messages - S.O.W. - Save Our World and Climate Change. Shots of Rupentine in Australia and Nevada busy helping with environmental issues.

"Thank you all for coming. My name is Herman Kraut, CEO of this network Tectonic Shift Media. Behind me is the message for today, tomorrow *and* beyond."

"A pioneer in promoting the message on the screen behind me, through *youth* campaigns and initiatives, we have Jeremiah Jackson. Soon, we will be joined by the man of the moment. Let's put our hands together again."

The audience is a healthy mix of mums, dads and kids; many, many kids, a number much higher than expected. The reason is that Frank had positioned his campaign around the theme of cleaning the world with kids leading the charge. It is the new spirit.

Herman Kraut and Pippa Pinkman, a TV

political analyst are on Center Stage while Rupentine waits backstage.

Milton Meredith and Thomas Brown have their eyes glued to the monitors.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, the star of today *and* tomorrow, the next president of the United States, I give you, Mr. Frank Albert Rupentine.”

Music blares and a respectable number of balloons are released to add to the fanfare.

Frank Rupentine walks out on center stage.

“Good evening. Any kids around?”

All kids scream at the same time, “Yeah, Yeah.”

Frank leans forward with his right hand behind his ear. “Kids, are we gonna clean the world together and save it from burning down?”

“Yeeeeeeeah.”

“Kids, look at the screen behind me.”

He turns his back to the audience and looks at the screen. The kids shout, giggle, pump their fists and point at each other as they see themselves on the huge screen. A smile of satisfaction returns on

his face, he turns around and continues.

“We’re going to clean it together, get Climate Change under control, save the world, get America back together again and heal the divide. The future of this Country is in your hands, kids, do you agree?”

“Yeeeeeeeah.”

“Confidence is moving up,” utters Thomas Brown.

A lady in the auditorium is handed a microphone; she promptly stands and asks Frank. “Kate from Oregon. My husband is a logger. My brother, a coal miner. I agree with your agenda, but we need food on our tables, now.”

“Great question, thank you Kate. Evolution not Revolution, I cannot stop progress, nobody can.”

“But Sir, what will you do?”

“The problem is greed. The laws are there, but they need to be followed and enforced, sometimes religiously.”

“Specifically – what will you do?”

Thomas Brown looks at Milton Meredith, “that’s a curly one. Bit aggressive. Increase his confidence level by one.”

Milton punches a few numbers on his keyboard and Frank's tone and aggression level raise to the anticipated level.

"Coal is being replaced by other fuels - solar power and wind farms. A gradual change, it means re-training. There will be cleaner jobs with much less risks of lung disease for your husbands. We will protect your families and your children."

Frank pauses.

"We will preserve lumbering."

The audience starts getting excited and demand that he goes off script. "No script. Take our questions."

Rupentine promptly lets the script drop into the trash can. The audience, now with eyes wide open and mouths agape goes silent.

Milton rubs his eyebrows, "Jesus, now what? He's gonna be a hero or a zero."

The audience rises and gives Frank a round of applause. His hands are in the air up, up, up. A louder applause. Leans over the mike again with his hand on his ear. "I can't hear you. Louder, louder. Thank you. That's the spirit."

Thomas to Milton, "Roll the dice. More confidence, aggression, killer instinct and

memory. Increase those patterns by 3, 5, 1 and 2."

Milton keys in a new set of numbers, "Boom, the numbers up again. That confidence tweak worked really well."

Then a man in audience stands up and asks, "American blueprints? Immigration? Technology?"

Frank thumps the lectern. "Representation of foreign agents in U.S. boardrooms will be severely cut. Buying our Boeings? All parts, from widgets to wings, nose to tail will be produced and assembled here in the U.S.A."

He sips some water.

"Migration policy - controlled and balanced. We determine our own destiny. Yes, Pippa."

"Pippa Pinkman from - ."

Frank Rupentine purposely interrupts.

"We all know Pippa, big hand please, ladies and gentlemen."

"Thank you. Well... I lost my train of thought... Have you chosen your campaign manager?"

"Yes I have, and you will know when I announce my candidacy."

Frank decides to move on. "God bless you. God bless the United States of America."

Rupentine points to the Stage Manager. On cue, 'Stars and Stripes Forever' starts playing followed immediately by the U.S. National Anthem.

Herman Kraut is excited with Frank Rupentine's performance. That was the primary objective and it is fully achieved. His next objective and target are literally in sight, maybe even within reach. It needs to be tackled with vigor. He needs to reel in Nora Carr and get her to accept to join the Presidential campaign.

Chapter 05

Rupentine plays an acerbic game.

5

The show is now over and the audience has left. The VIPs, Herman, Jeremiah, Nora Carr and Frank Rupentine continue to socialize.

Milton approaches Rupentine who is chatting with Jeremiah.

He whispers in Frank's ear. "Nora Carr is here. Campaign Director! Frank, please set up a meeting for tomorrow. Herman's Floor. Okay?"

"Got it."

Herman greets Nora, "Hi Nora. Well, what do you think?"

"It went very well. Focused Message."

"Do you think he can save our world? Somebody needs to help him get there, how about you?" asks Herman.

“Happily retired.”

“Too young, too smart for that. It may be your biggest challenge yet.”

“Why... why do you say so?” asks Nora.

“That’s what you’re thinking, right?”

“Bit heavy, forward and cocksure.”

“Tough world, you know how it is.”

“I realize that but...” replies Nora.

Herman and Nora walk side by side and he continues, “My friends are pumping money in the ‘Message’, not in Rupentine per se – aha, here is Jeremiah, – JJ, please meet Nora Carr.”

“In the company of a sports superstar and a TV Mogul. Who am I?”

“You’re Nora Carr surrounded by luminaries. Ha, ha. What’s next? The big boy?” adds Jeremiah.

“Let’s go see him. Hi Frank, meet Nora Carr.”

“Pleasure to meet you. What do you think our chances are, Nora?” asks Frank Rupentine.

“Pretty good I would say. Right message at the right time. You sounded very convincing. Ebullient!”

"That's a very generous word. I am looking for a campaign director. If you'd like to listen, I could outline my views."

"Very much so. I am intrigued."

"Tomorrow morning ten o'clock? Can we use one of your offices, Herman?"

"Sure the one next to mine."

"Next to the seat of power. See you tomorrow. Hope you serve good coffee, Herman," commented Nora.

"The best, will make the news of the day, ha. Frank, I will get you my limousine when you're ready and will give Maria Ramos a lift."

"I'm ready, Herman. Nora is a smart cookie, maybe too fucking smart."

"Can't go wrong. The ladies are over there so we better make a move. It's been a great night and you did extremely well."

HERMAN IS ON an early morning jog near Central Park.

Jeremiah is about to tee off at his favorite golf course in Chicago, the Cog Hill Club, when he gets a call.

"How's JJ?"

"Hold on, Herman. About to tee off - what do you think?"

"I have some doubts. Milton should talk to Frank directly on this. I'm out of breath jogging, can you get Milton?"

Jeremiah calls Dr. Meredith while Herman stays on the conference call.

"JJ, this is Milton with a mouthful of breakfast and then up in the nerve center to monitor our illustrious duo. You liked it so far?"

"Not sure they're in love. Any panic attacks yesterday?"

"We made adjustments and gave his killer instinct an additional boost. It worked as we planned."

Herman is still out of breath but jumps in, "That will be vital for debates."

"The SHIM Chip will be available by then, that's the pinnacle for control," adds Milton.

"The Speech Hearing Input Monitoring Chip?"

"Correct, but it entails tricky implementation. I have to get back on the monitoring, it's about to start."

Meredith and Brown get ready to monitor a sharp conversational encounter.

Herman's secretary Jessica greets Nora

Carr and escorts her to the office. Rupentine joins her 5 minutes later.

They study each other for 5 seconds.

Frank kicks off the conversation, "Let's swap seats, Nora. I'll take the guest's chair."

"That's nice of you, why is that?"

"I like to give people I work with, maximum power. See how they exercise that power."

Nora Carr suddenly twitches. Herman had warned Frank about this. So he ignores it and pauses momentarily studying the look on Nora's face.

"Power - an interesting commodity. Do they grab it? Or do they hesitate to take it? Do they act responsibly? Or do they abuse it? Do they use its leverage when negotiating? Or do they squander it? That kind of logic."

Nora is puzzled and unsure, "How do you think I handled the first five minutes then?"

"More importantly, it is how you yourself, think you have handled the first five minutes."

"With excellence."

"There you are, confidence. That is exactly what I am looking for and we will need lots of that. Seemingly insurmountable hurdles to overcome."

"Why me?"

"You're the first one I am seeing."

"How many more?"

"How much time do I have?" asks Frank.

"Not much. Not long."

"Is there a difference?"

"Quality. And a set time-frame."

Frank nods pensively, "What do you think I should do?"

"If I were in your shoes, I would look at two. Maybe three."

"Choices or candidates?" continues Frank.

"The latter. I am confident, I am ready and I can back it up. So Mr. Rupentine, which choice would *you* make, the first or the second?"

"The first," answers Frank.

"Was that answer predetermined, or rushed?"

"The former. As to why - I trust my colleagues and their judgment."

"Great, let's talk details then, coffee first?"

"Good idea."

"What you do think, Milton? Is he in command?"

"Most certainly Thomas, no tweaking required, but just in case, let me increase his confidence level. She's a hard nut, see how she turned the tables around."

Frank continues, "Good coffee. First - some musts. The youth of America will drive the agenda - Save Our World. We believe in it, they believe in it, they convince their parents. That's well over half of the electorate. They vote for us. We win. Simple."

"Agree. Do you always speak in short sentences?"

"Most of the time, Nora. Time is precious. Also short sentences focus on the message."

"True, tell me about Maria Ramos. Known her long?"

"Few years. Maria Ramos understands Nevada and California, the West in general. She will stay as campaign

manager and you are *the* campaign director. You are her boss. You need to agree entirely to what I have just said. You will get me there, how you do it, is completely up to you. Do we move on?"

Nora hesitated. "So far so good."

Thomas Brown barks out, "Milton, he's getting aggressive. Tweak his aggression, scale it down by one."

"Tell me how you handled Zach. His agenda. Disagreements. Anything that could throw our campaign off the tracks. You think I'm easy? Do you think you can handle me comfortably?"

"Piece of cake," replies Nora.

"Am I soft or mushy? Am I hard or dry?"

"Just perfect! You stated your objectives, I agreed, otherwise I would have been on my feet and out of this room."

"Pleased to hear that, Nora."

"Zach - no disagreements, same as you, he trusted me with the whole campaign and never interfered. His focus was the Senate and mine was to get him there *and* keep him there."

"And me?"

Nora, now showing one-upmanship, "Yours is the Country and the World. I stay on my side of the tracks; you stay on your side. The tracks will meet and merge seamlessly and we will go a long way together, two terms."

"Well said and impressive. You come across extremely well. If you are happy, we'll call it a day and I will be in touch. Two days from now to be exact. Thank you."

"Here is the list of all the important dates and events. Caucuses, Primary Debates, Presidential Debates, etc."

"That's commendable. Very organized. I noticed you have not asked me about your salary, conditions and the like."

Nora Carr now with a broad smile on her face, "I trust you, Frank - Oh... one more thing? Where would Maria be based?"

"Perhaps something on your mind, Nora? You asked about Maria twice. She is important, not as important as you are, but important nevertheless. The answer is Nevada."

"Uh... Safe enough. See you, Frank."

She leaves. Herman Kraut barges into the office.

Frank is wrinkling his nose and wears a frown.

“You like her?”

“She’s good. Bit too pushy perhaps. Her nervous twitch puts me off, and her tits move like jelly, left, then right in a blink of an eye.”

“That’s why they call her ‘Bitch with a Twitch.’”

“Very appropriate. In summary, I don’t think I like her, but she’s the only game in town.” He pauses, then continues.

“Could be a problem for Maria. I have to give it to her though, she is thorough; she will be harassing me and hustling me to death, I guess that’s what I need, as much as I hate to say it.”

THE REALITY OF running a presidential campaign involving hundreds and often thousands of people starts to hit home. Even at this early stage, friction manifests itself between the candidate, the campaign director and the campaign manager and even further down at the lower ranks.

Like a first-time candidate for the Presidency, a Campaign Director faces a mountain to climb – it’s learning on the job. Besides managing and co-ordinating a

multitude of complex tasks, fund raising is an indispensable skill. Add to that, the huge disparity between running a local, state or senatorial marketing campaign from a presidential one.

Simply put, the task of addressing the needs, wishes, aspirations and listening to voices of not just a few million people within a State, but of 340 million across the Nation presents differences of gargantuan proportions. It's tantamount to comparing a Garden Skink Lizard with a Monitor Lizard, the latter dripping venom on you... across the airwaves and print media.

Crisscrossing not just one state but most of the 52 States is not only physically tiring but astronomically expensive. Understanding the huge differences and variety of expansive agendum, from climate change, to migration, to education and how to make your address all-inclusive without alienating any big or major group is a task and a half to the power of 100.

So, what is the answer, where might one find a solution?

As has happened in the past, the electorate can have a great learned intellectual running for president but

completely useless in managing. Maybe a clown for a president who entertains a stratum of society and sings their song or a smart person who should cut it but who has no charisma. Or perhaps a candidate with a combination of all positive qualities from above, good and bad but somehow more balanced. Above all, one needs money, lots of it and this is Nora's most precious skill.

Abortion, gun control, environmental issues... but the one that would take the cake is Climate Change which is at the forefront of Rupentine's campaign.

With all the above in mind, to run an effective campaign for an area 800 times the size of Connecticut, Nora Carr needs all the help she could get. But getting picky, prickly and bitchy would not help her cause or that of the candidate.

Irrespective, the marketing wheels are now set in motion with all the disadvantages for such campaigns identified and well-documented. It is a mixed bag of pluses and minuses.

IN THE PRESIDENTIAL candidate, we have a potentially uncontrollable charging bull, unless his medication is dispensed in a timely fashion via modern software and then straight into his CPU core memory.

In Nora Carr, we have fund-raising and organisational expertise. She is too much of a disciplinarian and too ego-driven often appearing as if operating without brakes. Even worse, willing to charge through a brick wall just for the heck of it. In short, not always pragmatic.

In our super scientists buried in the subterranean depths of the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, we have two brilliant academics in Milton Meredith and Thomas Brown. They use their utmost medical, scientific and surprisingly managerial skills to the max but are never sure where the ethical boundary is. They constantly remind themselves that both could end up behind bars enjoying each other's company for years to come if they are lucky to be granted twin-share accommodation.

In NIFAI, we have an extremely robust organization operating in a god-like manner using the Holy Trinity of Computers - the Trinitas Super Computer - machines that can equally be so fragile as they are robust. Milton and Thomas are the masters of this system but paradoxically they are at its mercy. They are surrounded by an army of computer geeks who constantly feed, sift and analyze computer data churned out by

this electronic beast. A state that was created underground, exists underground and its existence is only known to a handful. And within itself, the possibility of an underground movement aka a Deep State. At one end, it produces A.I. Chips for the military, at the other, it controls the President's behavior 24/7 if need be. The main threat - 'subterfuge code' - a present and real danger.

The two benefactors have different motives. Jeremiah for genuinely pure philanthropic reasons whereby he has already kissed goodbye close to \$200 million. Herman still has to show his cards although tossing \$150 million in to get NIFAI going is something to be admired.

TO COUNTER-BALANCE all the above obstacles, it is worth reiterating that an ultra-high-tech microchip physically implanted in the head of Frank Rupentine is itself most certainly a distinct advantage. It prevents him from behaving like a mechanical bucking bull constantly spurred on by his genetic bipolar disorder. It makes him hard-to-control. Such disease makes him charge forward but not in a uniform direction while he threatens to throw off anybody who tries to mount him, control him or even guide him. All this could be avoided but only if

the microchip is utilized to detect looming disastrous behavioral patterns.

Harnessing the power of the implanted microchip and using it effectively from thousands of miles away in Nevada while he meanders across 52 States on the campaign trail is the ultimate lesson in control management. But that assumes that his temperamental manager, Nora Carr and his handlers, the Kraut-Jackson team can stay in the saddle till they get their potential explosive bull to the main arena.

Similar to rodeo team-roping, the founders placed their noose around Rupentine's neck. Together, they pull, push and steer him to the penultimate destination: the Democratic National Convention.

Slowly, but surely, they are succeeding in moving him forward before they can put him on the big stage and then to the promised land: the Oval Office.

Chapter 06

NIFAI directors monitor the Presidential debates.

6

October 27th 2022. Frank Rupentine is out with kids busy picking up litter and rubbish. He is holding a bag open while a kid piles in the trash. The cell RINGS. It's Nora.

"What are you up to?"

"Picking up rubbish."

"Why did I ask, I should have known. Okay, a quick call since you're busy. I have the dates. You announce that you're running on March 1st from Nevada. My appointment as Director, will be announced on March 15th from NYC, maybe Nevada. You can get back to the rubbish now, Frank."

Frank sounds curt, "That should be fine Nora, thank you." He ends the call. "Bitch."

Now he is back home after a hard day sanitizing popular tourist spots. The media, inevitably starts taking a keen interest following his every step and persistently asks him questions with regards to the announcement dates, campaign director and campaign manager.

He has been giving no less than four interviews on any rubbish collection day and a few impromptu interviews to local newspapers. He always looks forward to his shower, the evening meal and then his paperwork.

Today, a number of thoughts have formed an opaque barrier in Frank's mind.

He steps into his bedroom - settles down and starts highlighting paragraphs from Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. He turns the book over on his lap and rests his head on the pillow. He pushes it on his bedside table, still open with both covers facing up, then takes his specs off and places them safely next to the book. The mild sleep apnea gets Celine's attention. She tiptoes in, turns the lights off, pulls the door and walks out again.

Meanwhile, in the NIFAI Center in Nevada, a nervous looking Thomas Brown

calls Conan Docherty, the Head of the Programming Unit.

Still chewing on his fingernails, he asks Conan "How long before you can transfer the SHIM software?"

"Five minutes. Stop worrying Thomas. He won't get up refreshed but he should be okay. What's the concern?"

"Your predecessor, Constantin Kamov. He could have corrupted the code and Frank could wake up speaking Russian."

"Take it easy. It should be okay. Kamov is a third-generation American and probably has never been to Russia. I will hit the button in 60 seconds. He is snoring heavily."

Two past the hour. Frank Rupentine stirs, wakes up, breathes heavily with difficulty and swallows rapidly. He stands up rather shakily and falls back on the bed. On his feet again, he walks from one side of the bed to the other.

"Celine, I don't know what's happening."

Mumbling. Incoherent. He looks at the floor. He leans against the wall, runs his hand on the smooth surface and hunts for the light switch but loses balance. He tumbles into the dressing table knocking

down a framed photo.

“Where are the bags? Where are the kids?”

Still glued to his monitors 200 miles away, Thomas Brown is now sweating and mumbling to himself, “I have never seen these numbers before.”

Meanwhile in Lake Tahoe, Frank is still trying to find his feet and get control of his senses. His brain is not functioning as expected, not yet anyway following the remote signals that entered his head a few hours ago.

“Where has everything gone. It seems so clean. No rubbish, no kids - my head is spinning.”

Celine rushes in with a glass of water, puts the light on and helps him to sip it down, slowly. He then reclines back in bed.

“It’s okay darling, it’s just a nightmare.”

Frank now appears more relaxed. She calls Dr. Meredith.

“Doctor, this is Celine. Frank went funny again. Another trance. All confused.”

“Don’t worry. We had to make a minor adjustment - remotely. He should be calm

by now. In the morning, give him one pink tablet and he *will* be fine, and try not to talk about it. Have a good night, Mrs. Rupentine.”

NORA CARR’S TEMPORARY office in NYC is a hive of activity. All staff are at their desks positioned ten feet apart, either busy talking to donors, analyzing polling charts or compiling data. She calls Frank whose phone is engaged, so she decides to leave a text message.

Polls looking good for us in all southern states. Remember, you have New York on Tuesday and a total of three functions on that day. Call me. Nora.

Maria Ramos’ office buzzes with activity. Young helpers moving around. Placards, banners, balloons and leaflets are scattered all over the place.

“Over here please ladies, 1000 copies of each. Marcella darling, run this artwork to the printers. Carlito, fold these letters for mommy. Nice even fold, then in the envelopes. Mommy doesn’t like anything that’s sloppy.” She keeps everybody on their toes, all for a good cause. She dials Frank.

“Frank, your brochures regarding the announcement date and the chosen venue – the Complejo Deportivo. All artwork is

completed. The marketing pieces look fine.”

Rupentine is still on the call with Maria Ramos when the other cell phone rings and he answers.

“Hi Nora, I’ve got Maria on the other cell. Hold on for a second.”

He picks up Maria’s call and continues the conversation.

“That’s good news, Maria. I expect to see the proofs tomorrow morning, if you could bring them over, please.”

He puts the phone down and now he talks to Nora. “Yes Nora, what’s new?”

“Money is coming in. Just wanted an update as to what’s happening at your end... with the marketing of your announcement date and venue.”

“Maria has the proofs ready and she will bring them in tomorrow.”

“Those proofs should come to me first, then, and only then, from me to you.”

“I know you have standards and you’re very disciplined. But we run from different books of different sizes. Mine has a larger cover, let’s not fight over turf. She is doing fine! Focus on getting the big dollars. Sure you will get a look at the

proofs and there would still be changes if anything is wrong.”

“As I said, money is rolling in, just wanted to know your side.”

“My side is great. Stay focused.”

Nora is not happy with the position that Frank is taking and dials Maria Ramos to sort it out herself directly.

“Maria, just had Frank on the line. He may not have the balls to tell you this, but those proofs must come to me. I need to control this from A to Z.”

“Nora, here we’re asking for tickets not money. All people here know him well and love him. This is not New York City.”

“You heard what I said, A to Z.”

“Stay on your side of the track, please. You’re supposed to help Frank get elected. Now, I have two requests.”

“Yeah, tell me.”

“Shove your alphabet up your ass and fuck off.”

“Maria, listen... the bitch. She cut off.”

A party atmosphere outside the Complejo Deportivo in Lake Tahoe. This new entertainment center is one in which Jeremiah Jackson has substantial

ownership. However, his biggest investment by far to-date is in the person who is the main attraction within.

Balloons, cameras, placards and banners – ‘S.O.W.’ and ‘Rupentine for President’. People wait in line to get in. TV network crews from across the Country are here in force. A huge outside screen shows environmental outdoor activities carried out by Frank and his young crews. Rupentine himself is seen carrying bags of rubbish followed by an army of kids.

The sun has gone down and the disc jockeys inside the entertainment center are spinning their records to a full house – an army of mums, dads and kids. Many young kids expect to see a glimpse of themselves on the big screen performing a great service to the State of Nevada.

Meredith and Brown watch from about 200 miles north at NIFAI in the Black Rock Desert. They gaze intensely at the medical monitors and indoor live streams.

“Frank’s behavioral patterns looking good, Thomas. He is showing full confidence.”

Rupentine walks in, waves to the audience and strides to the center stage. Then he springs onto a turntable elevated

platform. His chest is pumped out, and both fists are in the air. He hits a button to start a slow rotation, does a 360 degree turn and waves enthusiastically to the audience. He brings the rotation to a halt with a thunderous applause.

Frank fiddles with the mike for a while, "This mike looks - dead. Must be this black button."

He presses the button - nothing; he taps on it and still nothing happens.

"It is dead! Let's all stand."

The audience looks dismayed. The National Anthem starts playing. Suddenly, the mike rises to the occasion as if on cue. The gathering explodes into a loud applause.

Thomas Brown is elated, "Well-thought out, Frank. Excellent."

"Let me check this mike out. Wow it says 'Made in the U.S.A.' Wait for it - even better, right here in the State of Nevada. It must have artificial intelligence. U.S.A."

The audience rises and chants U.S.A. as Frank pumps them up even further, raising his hands up, up, and up.

"As we have seen, Climate Change is on

everybody's lips, a real and present danger." He pauses and then continues, "Young kids, *you* will save the planet of tomorrow and we need your help. We will continue to work together with the support from outside organizations and we will conquer."

He places his hand on his ear.

"Kids, do you agree? Can't hear you. Watch my hands, if they go up, I want to hear it louder and louder."

"Yeeeeeeeah. Yeeeeeeeah. Yeeeeeeeah."

Rupentine hits another button on the console and an announcement comes on the Public Address System.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, the next president of the United States, Mr. Frank Rupentine."

Appropriate music blasts out.

"I, Frank Albert Rupentine, am announcing my candidacy for President of the United States of America."

He indicates to the audience to stop clapping, moves closer to the mike, and hums the opening note of 'Stars and Stripes Forever'. He waves his hands as if conducting an orchestra. The music blasts out; the audience gives him a rapturous

applause; the kids start dancing and jumping on stage; balloons go up; confetti rain down.

Thomas Brown yells out, "Whoa. We have a winner."

It's late at night now, the Complejo Deportivo looks empty and the crowd joins in the festivities outside where a carnival-like atmosphere still rages on.

The jubilant crowd hopes to get themselves on the airwaves as the TV crews are out there in force. The TSM crew is well represented rubbing shoulders with CNN and FOX.

Herman Kraut is amongst the crowd checking that all systems are working to his satisfaction and catching up with different crew members. He stands next to one of his reporters ...

"... behind me, the Complejo Deportivo in Lake Tahoe, Nevada. A major announcement. Frank Albert Rupentine, the champion for Climate Change has in the past ran for Governor of Nevada and failed. Today, the first of March, he has announced he is running for President of the United States. He has an enormous following especially with the younger generation. This is Hans Morten, Lake Tahoe, reporting for TSM, New York."

THE DAY AFTER Rupentine's announcement to seek the Presidency, Nora calls him.

"So how do you think your event went? Happy?"

"I feel good about it, we can always do better, there are many areas of improvement where your expertise will come into it, but so far so good."

"Very important point. The Primary Debates will be knocking on our doors soon, and we have to be prepared."

"How do you read the opposition?" asks Rupentine.

"Currently not crash hot, but you can't drop your guard. They have a couple of formidable opponents lined up. Irrespective of who stays in the race, the debating sessions will be much tougher."

They continue to discuss Town Hall Meetings, Caucuses and Primaries in more detail. It is agreed to work together on a series of preparatory dry runs to be followed by friendly Town Hall meetings, informal gatherings, photo ops etc. He agrees that he will be better prepared for the Primary Debates after having gone through all of the above.

"I want to keep a low profile until announcement date as your campaign marketing director. What date would that be?"

"March 15th as we agreed," responded Rupentine.

"Okay, in the meantime, most of the communication will have to be by phone. I will arrange an outdoor setting with groups of friends and make the formal announcement in an informal setting. No pomp, but I will make sure the Media and Newspapers are well represented. Certainly, TSM and CNN. What's happening with Maria Ramos, Frank?"

"She will be working on campaign marketing from her Nevada office, but you're in charge. Is there a problem with that?"

"No, none at all - huh ... but she will have to adapt to the new procedures," answers Nora.

"Make them practical, will you," retorts Frank.

The constant monitoring of Frank's behavioral pattern from the Nevada Office was unbeknown to Nora.

She spends the next few days studying the potential dates for the Primaries

trying to figure out where the campaign team should be on what days. It is still a bit early and no fixed dates were available.

To be practical she follows a pattern that was set by the Biden-Harris team three years ago.

All this while keeping in close contact with all key campaign staff in New York.

Her treasurer aka fund manager tells her that the Bank Account shows \$147 million with \$65 more pledged.

She feels she is on top of it. She instructs her fundraising staff to look at cost-effective marketing using social media, in particular Twitter, which is perfect for transmitting messages influencing public opinion.

Back on the Primaries' trail, she soon learns how rusty she is on the intricacies involved in having a vital plan mapped out for criss-crossing the U.S. in an organized fashion. Her experience on the Connecticut campaign only involved travelling over short distances and in familiar territory. This lack of familiarity could easily throw planned events into confusion. Venues will need to be rebooked meaning that besides running

heavy bills it is also demoralizing resulting in a very negative effect.

So, she focuses her attention on the dates that matter most, those between late June 2023 to late February 2024.

FRANK RUPENTINE AND Nora Carr are on a Delta flight from Reno to NYC.

"You're tired, Frank? You still have lots of work ahead."

"Tell me about it. I only want to do what I absolutely have to do. No more, no less. Picking rubbish has far more impact than crapping on with corporate heads which is your area."

"Snappy huh! I'm trying to help elect the president of the United States, not the CEO of a waste collection company."

"You have a problem?"

"Yes, I do have a problem, it's Maria. I told her to organize her office. It's a mess."

"You two need to find a common path. We have to get through this. If not, one of you will have to go. She is a nice kid, I have known her for ten years."

"Well Frank, I just told..."

"... Shush. I want to go to sleep."

Four hours into the flight, and almost within sight of New York City, Nora Carr is still sulking and decides to wake him up, "Landing soon, wake up, Frank."

Going through the airport procedures is always a pain for busy people. Frank and Nora have not as yet acquired a celebrity status and were still waiting for specialized charter flights to be mysteriously made available.

The cab leaves JFK, then travels along busy Manhattan streets and comes to a stop outside the TSM Building. Nora steps out and looks at Frank still inside the cab.

"Aren't you getting in to say hello to the staff, they're expecting you."

"No. I'm sure the office is pretty and they are a happy bunch. I am going straight to my hotel. But do apologize on my behalf; tell them that I am not feeling the best and that's the truth."

Nora slams the cab door; she is completely pissed off.

"Asshole!"

Now inside the hotel, Frank calls Dr. Milton Meredith.

"Hi Milton, I am feeling all run down. Drained. I have a function with corporate

heads in 30 minutes.”

“Take one yellow tablet now, one in an hour and you should perk up. Okay?”

Meredith walks back into his office hoping that his most prestigious patient in faraway New York will be feeling better soon and decides to call Thomas Brown.

“Hi Thomas, Frank is in New York with Nora, they have a few functions with corporate heads. He is drained so I recommended some medicine. Let’s push his numbers, increase aggression... by one.”

“Done. We may have to put some quick answers in his head using the SHIM.”

“Thomas, tonight we’re guaranteed some wise-cracking guys amongst these corporate bigwigs.”

Thomas ponders for a few moments. “Penelope. She is indispensable. She knows what we’re on about, not all, but enough. I will buzz her now.”

“Hi Penelope, can you drop by with Google and the Library of Congress under your arm, see you soon.”

Penelope Spikes walks into the office. She is in her early sixties, wears a non-flattering outfit, a very ordinary

appearance and no make-up. She looks very much like an ageing academic with brilliant brains.

Thomas continues, "It could be a long night ahead, Penelope. Problem with your husband? Boyfriend?"

"No husband; no boyfriend; only books."

"Thanks for coming. Our prized asset will be amongst some smart people. They will test him out. We will need some fast answers. Political, legal, historical. Your memory, knowledge and Google, as always, will do the trick for us. Let's say one hour. Happy?"

"Try me."

"Okay. You'll use that headset. You listen. Key in the answer. I get it on my Apple. I will whisper it to Frank. Makes sense?"

"Perfect, please call me when you're ready."

Meredith looks at Thomas, "By the way, Jeremiah is negotiating with Supazon to sell them an S.O.W. franchise. All money will go into the Super Pac account. Herman also increased his reach in most of the capitals."

“Sounds like one gives it away, the other takes it,” added Thomas Brown.

The function now has moved into full swing. Nora Carr is seen chatting with Sid Lawson. There is only one objective on her mind – to squeeze as much campaign cash out of these corporate heads as possible, Sid Lawson certainly is a target amongst this corporate group.

“Here comes my man. Hey Frank, over here.” Frank walks to Nora and shakes hands with Sid. “This is Frank Rupentine, your future President; Sid Lawson, Computer CEO, Lawson Digital.”

“Nice meeting you, Sid. So, Nora, has Sid given us money? Computers?”

Nora looks at Frank tongue-tied and puzzled.

“I had the money but you were late. It went back in my pocket. Still in my pocket.”

“That’s a relief Sid, I was looking for you. I’m here now. Can we have it please?”

They all seem to agree it is a funny line so there are smiles all around. But Nora feels slightly on edge.

Thomas to Milton, “I see, this guy is a

pain the ass.”

He activates the SHIM Chip software, gets it ready and sets it up to receive the signal.

Sid continues with his chat, “No problem, I will make the donation available again, but use it wisely. Of late, I’ve been refreshing my mind reading about Watergate. That Nixon counsel is in the news again... Howard Hunt?”

Penelope whispers to Thomas Brown, “John Dean.”

He whispers in the SHIM: “John Dean.”

“Uh... let me think, that was John Dean,” replies Rupentine almost instantaneously.

“Good memory. You must read a lot, Frank,” observes Nora.

“When I have time I do, not often these days. So who was your favorite character in that villainous plot, Sid?”

“Again, I can’t remember his name, he was a general, then Secretary of State...”

A message in Frank’s ear comes through: “Al Haig.”

“Al Haig. You don’t follow history?”

“No. I only follow one thing. I am very

impressed Frank, but I have another function. Bank on my money.”

“Nice talking to you, Sid. Remember just keep following the money. We do need people like you.”

Frank whispers to Nora, “Asshole. Okay let’s keep moving.”

Nora shows some disdain for Frank’s lack of civility but probably more because she felt upstaged. She continues, “Brilliant, Frank. Good sharp memory.”

“Some things I remember. Look over there, it’s Carmelo Pastucci.”

Carmelo is an old friend of Frank’s. He is from New Jersey and the CEO of ‘Better Waste Collection Services.’ A few years back, he supported Rupentine’s Clean-Up campaign with some heavy financial contributions and the limited use of his latest state-of-the-art cleaning vehicles.

He is in the mould of Tony Soprano, a facsimile, almost sculptured for the protagonist role. And equally as charming, unless he is dishing out punishment. He is seen in a group of four gesticulating with his hands indicating the shapes of boxes suggesting uniform measurements.

Frank yells out, “Hi Carmelo, come over here. Long-time no see. How’s the waste

business?”

“Hey Frankie, how are you old man. I see you’re running for president. Really wish you luck. I was telling some of my friends in the business, we are now compacting garbage in neat packages. They all look like boxes from Amazon, all of uniform size and then we ship them in containers to South East Asia for recycling.”

“And listen to this, we are making more money from the shipping than from the actual cleaning. Isn’t that something. I have just made an investment in buying my first lot of containers proudly displaying ‘Better Waste Collection Services.’”

“That’s really good Carmelo, always on the move as usual, now you’re across the oceans.”

Then Carmelo continues.

“My patch is so clean Frank, we almost cleaned out the Sopranos. We’ll be compacting money soon.”

Frank turns to Nora, “There’s your man, Nora.”

“Sorry ma’am, I didn’t mean to ignore you; in our game, business comes first, women second. There’s always room for

more, ha.”

He continues.

“Frank, I know you’re running for President and I wish you luck. I am with you all the way and I tell you what I’ll do. I will send a truck and its operator to your patch. My company name and logo on it of course but underneath that will be your campaign motto. The vehicle only needs one man to operate. It has the hands of a robot, it sweeps the streets, picks up the rubbish and compacts it.”

“You know what, I have been trying to get contracts using miniaturized vehicles in banks to make the job easier for us and cheaper for the banks, more efficient, more effective, you know what I mean – but no success as yet. Now, Frank, that’s worth a contribution to your campaign.”

“Yeah, well eh ... that would be great, Carmelo, good exposure – .”

“Sorry Frank, I didn’t want to be rude, one hundred thousand dollars for the campaign, in an envelope like before?”

Frank points to Nora. “This time it will be a check made out to the Rupentine Campaign Fund and send it to Nora Carr in the New York Office. Nora is our Campaign Director.”

“No problem Nora, make sure you keep away from beauty parlors, lady, don’t spend it all, ha.”

By now Nora decides to butt in.

“Carmelo, thank you, do your girls ever get to say anything in your company.”

“Only when they see the money, then, it’s just a thank you. Frank, I really wish you the best; next time, the Oval Office, okay? Thank you, Nora. One hundred big ones and a truck. Done deal. I have to keep the wheels turning over here. Bye.”

“Hey, Carmelo, grazie and say hello to Momo.”

Carmelo acknowledges the request and walks away.

“What an animal! What an asshole! Who the fuck he thinks he is and who the fuck is Momo?”

“Manolo Montano, Momo for short. He controls a bigger share of the pie. If you mince words with him, you’re minced meat in the back of one of the trucks. You see, Sid makes computers, Carmelo crushes them. By last count Carmelo is worth \$250 million. Just be nice to him. Don’t let it get under your skin.”

They continue walking to the next

group.

“Hey now, wait a minute, Frank,” fumes Nora.

Frank stops, looks at her and utters, “Yes?”

“Doesn’t matter I guess,” says Nora.

Back in the Nevada Monitoring Office, Thomas thanks Penelope for her assistance. “That was phenomenal, Penelope, we would have been lost without you.”

“I had better get back to my books now.”

Chapter 07

On the Campaign Trail with warring campaign managers.

7

The dilemma at the NIFAI Center was the gray line between what's ethical and what's not.

"Thomas we are now breaching what I consider ethical guidelines, except we will never know when it's absolutely necessary for us to do so. Monitoring will stop prior to bedtime. It is a necessary evil but I don't see any options."

It is obvious that behavioral pattern changes need to be effected with even more speed. Instantaneity is a required but unachievable objective.

A software change allowed them to increase Rupentine's brain processing speed, aka his CPU speed, by a couple of nanoseconds. This would somehow compensate for their ultra-slow response

speed. Converting their own thoughts into instructions via keyboard strokes and then turning them into a signal that reaches Frank's brain is a punishing process. That tardiness is partly caused by their own human limitations and the lack of secretarial proficiency.

This would have unique significance when the debates get more serious and complex. They would require more in-depth knowledge of how Congress works and the procedures that are followed before a bill is put to the Floor until the time it is passed and approved by both Houses.

There is a big unknown as what goes through Frank's mind and his thought pattern while he is not engaged in a conversation. With the current software this is synonymous with reading his behavioral thinking patterns. Further work in pursuit of this was being carried out by one of the scientists in charge of one of the divisions at NIFAI - the 'Normal Behavior' Unit.

Apart from his resting time, Frank's daily life is now monitored 24/7. The SHIM capabilities are effective mostly while discussing U.S. Government policies with Nora. The daily dry-run debates start

with earnest and at least they spend one hour practicing. This shows tremendous benefit but proves to be a strain on Frank. Often, he gets up and just quits.

The time for Nora's appointment as Campaign Director has now arrived. She sets up the venue at the Sierra Calda Coffee Shop in Lake Tahoe for March 15th. The media is invited to be there at 10.15 but Nora advises Frank to run late on purpose allowing the crowd to build up and wait in anticipation; further, it adds to the hype.

Maria Ramos arrives first. She is in a black limousine with four of her own staff. Few local media people call out her name and she acknowledges them. Then Nora arrives and steps out of the car followed by her husband Ralph. She recognizes some faces in the crowd, returns smiles and proceeds to talk to Maria.

Within a minute Frank arrives with Celine and he is surrounded by media crews pushing cameras into his face as close as protocol permitted. He asks them to be calm and tells them he is here to have a quiet late breakfast. Two of them loudly retort by saying that they still have not had theirs.

Frank takes the initiative and without further ado, he gathers around him all the kids who wanted to be on camera. A perfect photo op and he won't let that go by. From now on, this gesture was to become standard, since all kids want to be on TV.

Then he introduces Nora Carr as the new national campaign director. He points out that her expertise includes handling similar work in the New York area, and also her time in Connecticut working for Zach Liebermann.

He indicates to her to field further questions. She clearly enjoys her spot in the limelight and knows well how to handle any awkward question that might arise.

The questions last for about ten minutes when attention turns back to Frank and he politely closes the show off. He points out that the climate change is the message and looks forward to the time when he will be their new president.

Over the next three months Nora develops plans to enable him to handle debates as smoothly as was possible at this early stage.

Most meetings took place in shopping malls, libraries and liberally-minded

universities. TV exposure was always available but not quite in abundance, however, it picked up as time went on.

The monitoring of his behavior is on track and transmitting subtle messages via the SHIM chip proves to be a blessing particularly on a couple of occasions when he almost messed up badly. Such procedure was not known to Nora but Frank knew that it could not just be divine intervention that helped him with instantaneous and correct answers on subjects that he was not sufficiently versed with. He complains of little exhaustion when SHIM messages are activated but increasingly feels more comfortable.

Now it appears that the funding stream is of concern to Nora. On the Republican side, money seems to flow faster to their supporting PACs and Super Pacs. She raises this concern with Frank including campaign travel. She explains that she is actively looking for the best charter rates to use for fast transport especially when the Primary Debates kick off.

As usual, the conversation is being monitored. A SHIM message comes through "No problem, I know somebody who knows somebody. I have been

thinking about it. Leave it with me.” Like a good parrot, Frank repeats the transmitted message almost verbatim and without hesitation.

JEREMIAH TAKES THE lead in raising funds. Milton is told that a Super Pac is in place. There are laws and regulations that have to be strictly adhered to with regards to keeping accurate records of incoming and outgoing expenses, the makeup of the fund itself and its overall activities.

‘The S.O.W. Super Pac’ is now in place.

JJ’s private jet can be chartered out for all travel-related political activities. Most of the time it was idle on the tarmac in O’Hare. The airplane in use is a Bombardier Global 7500 with 10,000 hours on the clock which was purchased for \$55 million. It has a capacity to carry all top echelon of the campaign staff in one trip.

Rupentine receives the go-ahead from Milton Meredith and he promptly informs Nora.

“Nora, the aircraft travel is going to be a piece of cake. I will email you the contact points for chartering the aircraft, the passenger capacity and the expected official competitive charter rates. The

profit/cost differential will flow to the Super Pac and accurate records must be kept.”

“Whose aircraft is it?”

“Not important for you to know.”

“Why can’t I?”

“Damn it, because I say so.”

“It costs around \$5500 – \$6000 per hour to run. The commercial rental rate that will be charged to our campaign will be \$15,000 per hour. So, the net profit will go back to the Super Pac.”

He continued to clarify the situation in point format.

“You can just concentrate on the bigger picture, the Primary Debates and Presidential Debates. Who is running, who is stalling, who is getting what funds, keep open eyes on polling and a long list of other things. And of course, dry debate runs and focus on getting me in the Oval Office.”

“Thank you for reminding me how to do my job, Frank.”

“You can call me an asshole after I put the phone down. I fully expect you to do that. If it makes you feel better you can say it now.”

Meanwhile Milton Meredith and Thomas Brown were religiously monitoring Frank's conversations and tweaking his behavioral pattern as seen fit.

Exposure and support for the climate message was increasing exponentially, at least that was the founders' opinion.

Money steadily flows in the Super Pac. This money goes directly towards the founders' own campaign fund. It supports their marketing and promotional costs since they were prohibited by law from supporting directly the presidential campaign. Much of this money is being spent on advertising the climate theme in the main media, and for orders of all kinds of campaign merchandise and paraphernalia placed for the S.O.W. campaign.

Jeremiah's marketing boys instruct the Super Pac to order 10 million balloons and 1000 balloon boxes to be delivered to O'Hare.

The Super Pac consults with the Democratic Party to get the names of the States who mostly need this promotional material. They are told to allow for 12 locations in total with one distribution point in each state.

Nora Carr was doing really well at fundraising but bundlers were appointed in New York, Florida and California. The results are immediately felt showing extensive increase in funds flowing in particularly from the East Coast.

Jeremiah is busy beefing up the Super Pac marketing and decides to become even more entrepreneurial. He sells the franchise for the S.O.W. and Climate Change livery to Supazon carriers in the U.S. and World Haulage Limited based in Europe. That livery is now being displayed on all their aircraft and vehicles both carrying the Climate Change and S.O.W. message further increasing the awareness that helps the Rupentine campaign. A huge profit is generated by this deal all of it going directly into the founders' campaign coffers.

Apart from trying to help Rupentine to secure the Presidency, Herman has his own long-term ambition – one might call it a hidden agenda to hold the Highest Office in the Land.

He is constantly paving the way to reach his goal within the next 12 years. Believing strongly in the media clout that he is constantly building and its powers to shape the message he invests in excess of \$120 million in a Florida-based network.

It gives him substantial coverage across the US, primarily in the Eastern and Southern States. At the same time this exposure offers great advantages to any Democratic contender.

All of a sudden, the TSM audience reach, increases five-fold. It includes Orlando, Tampa, Miami, Las Vegas, San Diego, Tucson, Albuquerque, Oklahoma City, Dallas and Atlanta Georgia.

All this exposure gathers momentum. The message is Climate Change and Save Our World. It resonates extremely well with the kids as had been predicted by Jeremiah when he conceived the concept. The kids convince their parents and the results are clearly evident in the polls.

Judging by the Gallup and SurveyUSA polls and those commissioned by the GOP, the Election is for Frank to lose. His rival on the GOP ticket is Richard Cruzman, who is trailing by around 10 points.

The unconfirmed final count of the Electoral votes is an almost replica of the Obama results in 2008. Rupentine 365 Votes, Cruzman 173 votes. 53%:45%.

Chapter 08

Nicola di Fermi, the futuristic thinker sadly switches off.

8

Herman Kraut and Jeremiah Jackson are invited to Nicola di Fermi's house. Peppina di Fermi joins them in the room and draws a chair by the roaring fire. Nicola sits in his wheelchair covered with a heavy blanket. He looks subdued but, in a way, still cheerful expecting a very positive election outcome.

Nicola addresses the small gathering in a very weak voice.

"My final dream is playing itself in front of my eyes. Soon the King will be proclaimed. You have made it happen for America, but unfortunately my time is limited."

Peppina pours drinks for all the four of them.

"In the future, a machine will make the

decisions, presents the President with a choice and then it's up to the Incumbent to select one decision to execute or ignore completely."

"Very challenging if not scary," adds Herman.

"Have faith. This video clip came in from Thomas Brown an hour ago. It demonstrates technology moving ahead in leaps and bounds. It shows a NIFAI drone in action. Here, it's on my screen. There is no audio so you only hear the humming and buzzing of the drone. Here we go."

Herman and Jeremiah now stand behind Nicola's wheelchair peering at his computer screen.

A high-tech room in semi-darkness buzzes with servers, flashing lights, dimmed monitors and myriad electronic gadgets. Heads gaze at laptops, iPhones and iPads. The desks are littered with empty coffee cups, cans of soda and half-eaten lunches still in their wrappers cluttering their desks. Out of the blue a drone silently flies into the room and gently deposits another large lunch box appropriately stamped McNIFAI's. A couple of guys get off their chairs and grab their late lunch - a better version of McDonalds, perhaps.

At the far end, drones, some with four propellers and a couple with six are parked in their square-like pigeon hole units. Twenty spaces in total, four of them vacant. Sixteen drones are all parked in their nests aka mini-hangars which are all neatly and clearly labeled. They show the name given to the drone and a long string of digits which represent the coordinates next to which there is a light signal that identifies the individual drone and its exact location within the array.

A technician with a remote in hand, walks towards a six-motor drone. It responds to his signal and moves its insect-like compound eyes in a preprogrammed pattern. A different set of eyes under its belly act in a similar manner. The individual motors start and stop allowing the drone to manoeuvre differently with the touch of a button.

The label on this particular drone's nest reads 'EAGLE CLAWS' - 'DOD Only.' Satisfied that the drone is working as expected, the technician enters a new command.

Eagle Claws comes off its nest, its eyes and head scanning and panning. It maneuvers gently and hovers one foot above a pizza-sized box positioned neatly

on the top of a desk. All this is clearly visible by a camera installed under its belly.

The top of the box is clearly labeled and reads 'Defense Department Sealed.'

Four claws come down and grip two opposite sides of the box, followed by the other two and then it gently lifts off. Now, the top of the desk appears to fade away, as seen through its underbelly eyes' point of view. The drone gradually changes direction. Evidently, now switching to its front set of eyes, a door is seen opening and it flies through the darkness outside. It follows the dark but well-lit labyrinth of streets ahead of it in this gargantuan cavern called NIFAI.

In its sight is a ray of sunshine that appears to get brighter as it flies towards it and then through it. And finally, in full sunshine, it navigates its way as it hugs the undulating terrain soaring and falling but keeping an exact height of twenty feet above the ground at all times. It is almost a replica in behavior of its namesake which is often filmed displaying its natural aerodynamic skills in the role of predator or delivering food to its young ones.

Then it slows down and hovers by a lonely boulder, projects its coordinates on

the ground below and transmits a signal and the picture to the NIFAI boys. A gentle buzz initiated from the NIFAI Drone Center confirms it is the correct drop location. It deposits the package, gently lifts off, travels a safe distance away, settles on the ground and trains its eyes back on the drop area.

Soon an Army helicopter touches down. A man in uniform gets out, retrieves the package and raises his left hand in the air. Promptly, Eagle Claws takes to the sky again and flies back towards its nest.

The short video ends and Nicola folds the screen down.

“From here the pick-up chopper takes the package to the National Guard in Yerington, and an Air Force jet takes off with the precious package for delivery to the DOD in Washington. The last drop is from Uncle Sam - no drone, just an electronic transfer to a Swiss Bank Account.”

Then he pauses and gathers his breath.

“Soon, I will have a letter addressed to the President.”

He pauses. Peppina passes him a glass of water.

“Upon my passing, Peppina will pass

you the letter and two copies. JJ, you will give the letter to the President. Both of you need to be present and fill him in on NIFAI. Now, if you excuse me, I need to get some rest. I hope I could see you soon, maybe for one last time.”

They get up. Each gives him a delicate hug and they leave with tears in their eyes. It is the last time that they see Nicola alive.

There is a family gathering at Nicola’s funeral service. Present are his wife Peppina di Fermi, Herman Kraut, Jeremiah Jackson and the Catholic priest who blesses the coffin and comes to the end of the short service.

“Nicola’s last words to his wife on 20th December, just before he passed, were in Latin ‘Sumus Omnes Pares’. We are all Equal. Then, ‘Finis Mediis Iustificat’ – The End justifies the Means.”

The gathering look puzzled. The service comes to an end, the coffin eases down gently and the crypt is sealed. Leaning on her cane, Peppina walks slowly towards Jeremiah and Herman. She hands one envelope to Herman and two envelopes to Jeremiah. They thank her and walk to Herman’s limousine.

Herman looks at Jeremiah and

whispers, "It's a sad day today but we expected that. Over the last few days, we have witnessed a dying star and a new one being born."

Chapter 09

Inauguration. Rupentine takes Office. Enemy missiles launched.

9

Mountains of paper surround Rupentine in his Lake Tahoe sitting room. He goes through the paperwork methodically. Then he puts these documents aside to answer an incoming call from Milton Meredith.

“Don’t ask, I am feeling great.”

“Excellent result the other day, Mr. President. Your doctor at the White House needs to be your neurosurgeon – Dr. Koch.”

“Agree. Don’t want anybody to get close to my head and ... Milton, thank so much for all you’ve done for me.”

INAUGURATION DAY, JANUARY 2025. Enthusiasm fills the splendid foregrounds of the U.S. Capitol and beyond. This is not only evident, but it is very much felt. A

multitude of languages are heard being spoken and sign language is being used to the maximum.

Very prominent in the seating arrangement are rows of Heads of State of all colors and denominations, their heads moving from side to side admiring the splendid Washington architecture. Their hands, often of contrasting skin color, lock and shake enthusiastically complimented by their own language-accented greetings. These are always acknowledged but not necessarily understood but at all times accompanied by the ubiquitous smile.

Amongst these dignitaries, the British Prime Minister, Tom Hawkins. He is in his mid-fifties and impeccably dressed. He is seated amongst the majority of VIPs. – all from the higher ranks of the U.S. Government.

Giant screens beam pictures giving coverage from all angles; fabulous architecture, the surrounds, the jubilant crowd and the VIP stands. However, ultimately the most coveted close-up shot of the day – a twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot square-of-attention. It is enthusiastically gazed at by the thousands of people present and by the millions across the

globe.

The crowd is in a festive mood waiting to finally see the person who they had voted for. They busily click on their digital media devices and relay historic pictures of this four-yearly event to their friends, relatives and families around the world.

Different festive music is heard from diverse groups often based on ethnic lines but always conveying a uniform message of hope. It is music that inspires optimism as evidenced by thousands of old Obama-type 'HOPE' slogans. Rupentine's face is on all of them as they are held above the heads of the crowd many such placards joyously made to bob up and down.

Posters stamped 'RUPENTINE' outnumber all other forms of signage. Kids proudly display placards and pictures of their climate change champion.

Men in black suits and dark glasses mix in with the crowd, observe in silence and are often seen whispering from the corners of their mouths into their lapels and cuffs.

Celine accompanies Frank Rupentine who shakes hands with Joseph Hayden, the incumbent president now in his late seventies. The two presidents follow similar political lines albeit on different

tracks and at different speeds. Celine leaves the trio and joins Maria who seems a little lonely.

“Maria, this is indeed a great day,” whispers Celine.

Nora spots them so she approaches and joins in the conversation.

“Nora, haven’t seen you for a while. You look glamorous. I just told Maria she can harvest ten years of support for Frank any minute now.”

Nora’s eyes lock momentarily with Maria’s.

Nora Carr unfortunately gets an uncontrolled nervous twitch but continues, “True, it takes lots of time, lots of dedication and... specifically lots of money to elect a President.”

Celine listens carefully but is taken aback by Nora’s sudden quick transverse movement. Although appearing somewhat entertaining to her, the new First Lady decides to leave... but makes a final comment.

“Yes... Point taken. You two can now discuss many things you have in common. I will see if I can find where Frank is.”

Nora reaches into her bag, takes out a

tiny pill and pops it in her mouth, swallows hard and continues.

“Cutting the crap, Maria, are we going to sign a peace treaty or ...”

“... I am not at war with you!”

“Good to know.”

Frank, accompanied by Jeremiah and Herman stops by his two warring ladies and whispers “Peace. Otherwise, heads will roll.”

Another nervous twitch but she continues, “Remind her, not me,” replies Nora in a slightly elevated voice.

Herman looks at Frank, “Told you so. Bitch with a Twitch.”

Jack Steiner is fifty-five years old, fit and trim, ex-U.S. Army general. He is the current Defense Chief destined to continue giving his services to the Country within the new Administration. He engages with the incumbent president with a concerned look on his face. Joseph Hayden politely points to Rupentine urging him to go see the new President.

“Mr. President, we have a situation. Dear Leader just fired 4 missiles all landing in the water, close to Seoul, 11.45 our time. He is testing you.”

“Jack, see me after the Oath of Office.”

East Portico. Noon. Frank Rupentine has his hand on the Bible while the Chief Justice administers the Oath of Office...

“I, Frank Albert Rupentine do solemnly swear... that I will faithfully execute...”

The Secret Service Agents around the President look incognito behind their dark Raybans but appear somewhat nervous. Suddenly they seem more agitated and pull their lapels closer to their mouths. They tighten the circle around the new president, while others move more openly amongst the crowd with an increasingly hurried pace.

A commotion is evident at the far back where the crowd appears somewhat sparse. No sooner that it had started, it ended. One man is seen being bundled into a car and the ceremony continues without further hitches being evident.

“... and defend the Constitution of the United States... so help me God.”

The Secretary of Defense standing close by looks at Rupentine and indicates all is A-Okay.

‘Hail to the Chief’ plays on and the crowd feels euphoric.

Once finished, Jack Steiner confers with the new President who listens attentively. They talk for a few moments in whispers. Rupentine is shown on the huge screens with a look of concern on his face but appears confident. Then within a tight circle, the President is heard saying ...

“Sonuvabitch!”

The hot mike is quickly turned off but the consultation continues.

“Break some glass. Get F-22s in the air over Pyongyang. Chances?”

“Ninety-nine percent,” answers Jack.

“Doable?”

“Tricky. It can be done.”

“*Today*. Choose your timing.”

“We normally prefer hundred percent.”

“A new Administration as of two minutes ago!”

“Yes Mr. President.”

The President, the First Lady, Supreme Court Justices and senior politicians leave the Center Stage and walk into the Capitol Building. The Commander-in-Chief is greeted by hundreds of people, but carries a somewhat anxious look. Jack Steiner follows, three steps behind.

The scenes inside are keenly being watched and enjoyed by the crowd outside still in a party mode. Suddenly there is CNN Breaking News. It is shown on all the big screens ...

“... the incident happened just before noon our time while Frank Rupentine was being sworn in. Four North Korean missiles landed near Seoul, all in the water. The new President was immediately informed and decisive action followed. At 4 am Pyongyang time, two o'clock Eastern, F-16s performed a bombing run in North Korean Waters as a warning. That was followed by two F-22 Stealth Bombers flying at supersonic speed of over Mach 1 right inside North Korean airspace. In Military terminology a 'boom carpet' was created over Pyongyang causing glass to shatter for miles around. It sends a very loud and clear signal to the regime. This is John Palermo reporting for CNN Washington.”

A deafening silence, then an air of jubilation. The big screen now cuts back inside the Capitol. The President is shown being applauded, at the same time being asked for further clarification by a number of reporters...

“Nothing like starting with a bang, Mr.

President. Can you tell us more about the North Korean raid?" asks the reporter. Rupentine's comment...

"No comment. This is my day."

Jeremiah and Herman watch the screens but the latter – the TSM CEO is in a rage and perplexed.

"How the fuck can this happen, JJ? I have spent two hundred million to-date to get this guy up there, four hundred between us, and TSM doesn't get the first bite of the cherry with the breaking news. It's fucking CNN again; I thought I had them by the balls by now."

"You need to grow bigger hands Herman, anyway, we'll be seeing Frank in two days."

RUPENTINE AND CELINE relax before retiring for the night. A call comes in from Dr. Milton Meredith.

"Hi Milton."

"Sorry to call you so late, Mr. President. Two gentlemen need to see you early next week. They played a big part in the whole process."

"Whole process? Make it eight-thirty Monday. The Secret Service will pick them up from the United Polaris Lounge

at Dulles International.”

A gentle knock on the Oval Office door and Herman and Jeremiah walk in. Rupentine gets up and gives them a very warm welcome.

“Gentlemen, I want to thank you for whatever it is that you have helped me with. And for giving America a chance. Please sit down.”

“Thank you, Mr. President. You recall Nicola di Fermi – the old man in the wheelchair. He asked us to hand you this letter upon his passing. He died a few days ago. We have our own copies – still unopened.”

“Thank you, Jeremiah, let me read it. Feel free to walk around – some really interesting revelations – what a mind... and a lovely letter too.”

“Here, please read it while I reflect.”

REPROGRAMMING THE PRESIDENT

Mr Frank Rupentine
President of the United States

Dear Mr President,

My name is Nicola di Fermi. I would like to congratulate you for your outstanding win.

I wish I could have been there in person on such a great occasion and personally present you this letter in my own handwriting, but my health and my hands would not permit me to do so.

Time is not on my side so I come to the point. All the four of us played a part in the success but your enthusiasm, the way you got the young people involved surely takes the cake.

A few years ago, we set up the Nevada Institute For Artificial Intelligence with the help of the U.S. Government who funded \$300 million, and \$150 million each from the two gentlemen in your presence who I refer to as "The Founders." Additionally a meagre \$10 million from me, just about all I had at my disposal.

NIFAI is the finest establishment in the U.S., I dare say the world. It houses the best research brains and the finest medical professionals by far superior to anything else. The location is Black Rock Desert in Nevada but it is hidden to all eyes.

The understanding between us and past Administrations was rather nebulous and it is better that it stays that way. The Government however, does expect us to deliver Military Artificial Intelligence Chips - MAIC Chips - on a regular basis. The Secretary of Defense has all this in hand. The Chip itself is continuously undergoing development.

To this day, we have delivered 1,000 AI Chips to the Pentagon at a cost of \$400 million. This is the lifeline of NIFAI.

The Founders had conferred on a number of occasions prior to the foundation of NIFAI. They showed great commitment to a presidency that would bring our two political sides together. Their aim, same as mine, was to heal America.

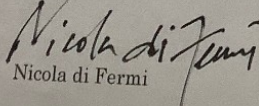
Further funding from The Founders and making their aircraft available, abiding by all the air-charter laws for campaign and presidential travel had absolutely nothing to do with NIFAI. Together they created the S.O.W. Climate Change Initiative and a lot of youth awareness. We rightly believed that we should base the marketing campaign theme around this message and movement, knowing that you would champion that cause.

Thank you Mr President for doing just that.

Mr President, I am feeling very tired so I have to close off. All I am asking of you is to have full trust in these fine gentlemen as I have full trust in you. I wish you success in healing the divide.

God Bless.

Yours


Nicola di Fermi

Herman agrees, "Now we understand and this is exactly what we expected. These are our copies. - Unopened."

"What brilliant minds and how can I ever thank you. Your commitment, resources, the mobilization of youth and the climate message will forever be in my heart. I accept your copies, they will go in the National Archives."

His eyes look sad and reflective, then he continues.

"Huh, Meredith. A great friend and a mentor. What an engineer. And Dr. Koch. Brilliant surgeon. We have to meet for Golf. I have a handicap - more than one. With the A.I. Chip and NIFAI, anything is possible."

Rupentine indicates the meeting is over. They are accompanied out by Secret Service agents and are driven back to Dulles International.

The lounge is quiet and orderly, mostly business people discussing, plotting and strategizing. They sit down and order light drinks and for a few moments look at each other, speechless.

Jeremiah breaks the silence, "Nicola gave us the new direction - Human Intelligence Machine. That covers us for

the next fifty years.”

“JJ, we must talk to Thomas Brown to fill us in on Trinitas, we should know enough about this supercomputer - enough to be dangerous. Remember, we have four hundred million dollars of our money in this.”

“‘Enough to be Dangerous.’ I like that, where did you get that from, Herman?”

“Believe it or not, when I feel stressed, I throw myself thirty years back, it refreshes me and tops up my confidence.”

“Yeah, where did you throw yourself to, now, I mean then, I mean thirty years ago?”

“You’re persistent, JJ. Okay, I was doing a stint in computers in a specialized department, as usual, punching above my weight. I had just been promoted to Data Base Administrator. A dinosaur position now. It was a grinding wheels manufacturing company based in Worcester, Massachusetts. My boss, Mike Magnusson approached me. By the way, this guy was in his late forties, lost an eye in an accident while carving a wooden phallic symbol, lost a lung through heavy smoking and was driven by enormous anger... something which he could never lose. He tried Anger Management, but to

no avail. You had to watch out when he was wearing a red shirt. It meant only one thing - danger... somebody was about to be blown sky high or get fired. He was known to smash his iron or wood on a nearby tree trunk if the swing was not going his way."

"You mean, he was not sinking them?"

"No, no, I mean he was not hitting them hard enough. He vented his anger by hitting those balls with a hell of a whack. Whether they ended up on the green, on the fairway, in the bunker or in the water was of little concern to him. With or without his red shirt on."

"Important to know that he was management-savvy but technically a lightweight. He often felt he was corralled by computer geeks feeding him bullshit. He never knew which way the smell is blowing to or where it was coming from for whatever it was that he was being sold or told. But he learned to survive and thrive. Just think how a president feels underneath that veneer."

"Herman, I'm gonna start yawning soon, where the fuck did you hear that expression 'Enough to be Dangerous'? For fuck's sake, tell me before I myself start to get fucking dangerous."

“Exactly JJ, you are releasing tension and that in itself is dangerous. I have never heard you using that four letter word before or appear to be threatening.”

“Stop fucking pontificating” says Jeremiah calmly while leaning slightly forward.

“Easy man, easy. Anger is not good for you. That reminds me of another thing about Mike, and you knew for sure he was irritated. Jesus, I wish I could write a movie scene with this one... listen, listen, JJ. I will play this in the present tense. Mike would half close his left eye... thinking about it, his face’s complexion looks like that of one of my favorite actors - Tommy Lee Jones, sorry I am rambling a little... so, left eye half-closed, he stares at you, reaches for his cigarette pack from his left shirt pocket. Marlborough in those days. Switches hands and flicks open the flap with the left thumb... flick and the flap open, then flicks the base of the packet with the right middle finger... flick again and inevitably one cigarette pops out, enough to see the brown filter tip. Are you listening?”

“Yep, I am fucking listening, not sure how long for.”

“He next places the packet close to his

mouth, reels in the cigarette in the right corner, now, with his tongue and with one quick flick he rolls it all the way to the left and then to the right, that's right, from one corner of his mouth to the next and then to the other and lights it up. The corner of his mouth now transforms itself in a perfect hole and he puffs out a cloud of smoke. By the way, the cigarette once lit never leaves the corner of his mouth. It reminds me of that famous Platters' song. That JJ, used to really impress me."

"Herman, I am not impressed but I am calm, where the fuck did you hear 'Enough to be Dangerous' from?"

"Coming to that, he approached me one day in the computer room and said 'Herman', and by the way, these are his exact words, I remember them so clearly."

"Herman, what the fuck did he say?"

"Yes okay, 'Herman give me your hand.' So I put out my right hand, he grabbed it with his left and then dropped a screw in my hand and I just stood there and looked at it. So I said, 'What's this?'"

"And Mike's answer?"

"It was a big dirty laugh and he said, 'So you can't say that I have never given you anything, Herman.'"

JJ bursts out laughing loudly. Other businessmen look a bit puzzled at these two high-fliers behaving in such unusual manner.

"Herman, for the fucking last time, how, when and where did you get the expression 'Enough to be Dangerous?'"

"Oh yeah, Mike had a way of drawing it out, but by the time he laid his cards on the table, you would remember that words combination for years to come ... okay, okay, I am coming to it, so he continued, 'Herman, you're a snowflake, but you hit hard like a hail ball. Always know enough to appear dangerous, be perceived as dangerous and be dangerous.' 3-Dimensional."

"So I stood there staring at him. Then he reached in his pocket and took a glossy card four inches by four inches. Square card."

"Oh, was it really square?" says Jeremiah.

"It was perfectly square, JJ. And he said, 'Here, this card is the Honeywell Buzzword Generator, I live by it. Pick any three words from the three columns and you sound intelligent and knowledgeable, throw a few of these around and you earn respect. That's how you keep your

underlings and peers on their toes.’ Now you see, JJ?”

Jeremiah looks at the barmen and orders another two Rum and Coke.

“Was he wearing his red shirt when he gave you the screw?” asks JJ.

“No, a cream one, that color emits a rather plausible feeling, kind of cool and makes you feel good.”

“All’s well that ends well – William Shakespeare,” says Jeremiah.

“It didn’t though, I got fired the next day. It reminded me of the screw he dropped in my hand.”

“I bet Mike was happier without you being there.”

“Only for a few fleeting hours, he got fired the day after and was banished to some coastal town in Texas, I think it was Corpus Christi. He was put in charge of a pathetic IBM 360/20 installation.”

Many people hated Mike, but a few, including myself, liked him, one of the few in the corporate ladder I have come across who had shown some balls.

“The few are the would-be leaders; the many are doomed to be followers. You and I know that well. Shame he ended up in

Corpus Christi.”

So I said to myself, “Fuck this ... FT for short, I am going to be my own boss, so I can afford my Canali suits, Santoni shoes and a Lamborghini. And I can change my car to a Ferrari whenever I want to; or have one of each.”

“So what shoes are you wearing today?”

Herman glances at his shoes, “Ferragamo.”

“Impressive,” says JJ. “You know, you should run for President in a few years’ time. I will give you my vote. But first you need to shed your elitist appearance and appear more like Rupentine, a man of the people, you know JCPenny, Macy’s ...”

“... Actually I am thinking about running, JJ. Would you run as my VP?”

“Let me think about that, let’s go.”

Chapter 10

A truly historic golf meeting at The Grove – an easy ‘Hard’ sell.

10

On the other side of the Atlantic, the British Prime Minister, Tom Hawkins, is strangely occupied carrying out a very unusual if not a unique chore. It is certainly not what you expect to see from the man at the pinnacle of British politics. He is in his mid-fifties, quick, witty and with the Eton stamp all over him.

Back in the White House, Rupentine finishes off his Daily Briefing. He takes a call from Tom Hawkins.

“Tom, good morning, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Great news, Frank. Hold on, I have this fly buzzing around my head.”

Tom swings his arm violently trying to swat the fly while the U.S. President patiently waits.

“Best to get your own National Guard on this.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting Frank, I have to be careful what to say. It could be a Russian spy drone, or even worse, Chinese.”

Rupentine hears a big thump.

“Got it. Squashed. My first catch of the day - oh yuck, where the heavens did that come from?”

“Fly catcher, spy catcher or drone catcher?”

“All three and more Mr. President. We have landed the best catch of the century. Best since the Atom Bomb. You’ll be in London soon talking about your favorite subject, Climate Change?”

“Correct, in 3 days’ time. Let’s do golf. Do I bring my clubs with me?”

“No. Just the check book, Frank.”

“How much?”

“Four.”

“Four million. That’s okay.”

“Billion.”

“What am I buying?”

“Part of the Congo.”

“That’s cool, Tom. Now I’ll be swinging from trees in the Congolese jungle.”

“Educated at Eton, Frank? Good sense of humor with an excellent British accent, old chap. See you soon.”

Meanwhile in the Nevada monitoring offices, Thomas Brown and Milton Meredith smile.

“Did he really go to Eton?” asks Thomas.

“Hardly, but he’s good with accents, must be his time in the U.K.” replies Milton.

FOR MANY YEARS, The Grove Golf Course has historically been a popular golf venue for British Prime Ministers and their guests. It is about 18 miles from the center of London.

Today, it hosts Tom Hawkins and Frank Rupentine and they are ready to tee off.

“So Tom, apart from Golf, what else is on your mind?”

“Ah that’s what I like, straight to the point – one might call it, a hole-in-one.”

“Well delivered,” says Rupentine.

“We have been working on this particular mineral for the last 3 years. We

have always been aware of its special qualities but finally we have concluded that it is indeed a unique commodity.”

“Its application to our defense systems and warfare cannot be quantified, suffice to say, its potential is 100 times greater than that delivered on Hiroshima.”

Rupentine looks stunned. “Would you like to repeat that, Tom?”

“You look keen, Frank, you must have something cooking up there. I think we are on the same page.”

“Tom, let me stop you there, diplomacy will be my forte and I will not use a sledgehammer to crack a walnut or a thousand walnuts, but I will not kill twenty million people to achieve peace, world domination or global supremacy.”

“Frank, none of that. You can keep the twenty million alive, ticking and doing well. And you can still achieve global supremacy, with Great Britain closely behind being Number Two. If not, we could potentially become Number One and you will slot right behind us.”

“That sounds intriguing, I am listening. So, what about this superior mineral.”

“When applied to new weapon technology called M.D.A., the new

weaponry can vaporise and melt down anything in sight within the target footprint that would have been precisely measured and secured via satellite mapping using the target's precise coordinates," says Tom.

"Frank, we cannot let the Chinese or Russians get a whiff of this."

"So how much will you be paying, Tom?"

"We are not. You are."

"Oh?" exclaims Frank rather surprisingly. "How's that?"

"That's why you are here. Hold it for one second, let me whack this one." Tom swings but the ball flies way off and lands in the bunker.

"Missed again Tom, certainly not as accurate as your M.D.A.," says Frank sarcastically.

"We have been negotiating in secret with this so-called Congolese protectorate-like State. It is completely independent of any other neighboring countries, protectorates, kingdoms or states. It has been inhabited by a friendly tribe for centuries and has therefore been their home and land since time immemorial."

"Its head is Abba Salam Kasongo. He is loved by his own people. A fierce tribal chief but these days he is purely a ceremonial head, nothing more, nothing less."

"We intend to make him King in return for his generosity in allowing us to mine his land."

Frank comments, "So judging by what you've just said, you're going back to the old colonial days."

"Hardly, we will offer him an initial sum and an annual stipend as homage if you like, commonly known as a bribe in general parlance. Plus, royalties per ounce of pure extract."

"The U.S. has been doing similar work around Idaho, I think. So why should we pay billions for this?"

"Be patient, Frank. We need to secure these rights by all means possible, so you may have to come down just a tad from the moral high ground that everybody knows you hold and do what is best for humanity. And I mean that with the utmost respect."

"Tom, let me remind you that my promise to the American people was to clean the world and reverse Climate

Change. You are offering a solution for world supremacy and then it takes another century for another Frank Rupentine to surface and pick up the baton long after this Rupentine is dead and gone.”

“No, no, hold on to your horses for a tad. My thinking is we split 80:20. You will have all the glory, power and image but our interests will be protected.”

“So what’s your plan?”

“You will transform this land using all aspects of technology that you can muster. There will be a base with your aircraft and defense systems, underground if need be and control your own airspace. Remember what I mentioned, 90 percent of the development on the weapon has already been finalized.”

“As old colonialists, we are trusted there. We will need to maintain that presence. We have teachers, medics, all that looks good, feels good and does good for the population. Your presence and ours will go hand in hand but the U.S. will need to exhibit less gung-ho attitude.”

“Tom, you’re the old masters, and I acknowledge that. The old Empire lives on, its reach is far less today than it was

in the past. However, the methodology is by far ahead now than it was two hundred years ago. You use all your past cunning and seduction with pizzazz, style and novelty, humanitarian neo-colonialism."

"Good God, compliments mixed with a touch of denunciation and a sprinkling of sarcasm. I will take that on the chin. In our minds, we will ensure that we are doing this to keep the world safe. I mean that. In China's hands, all of us will be slaves or perish together with the Dragon having had his last bellyful before he disappears like dinosaurs taking all of us with him."

"What does this Abba, what's his name again, what does he expect, how feisty is he, how manipulative and what does his tribe think?" asks Rupentine.

"That's Abba Salam Kasongo. His tribe thinks what he thinks. Period. What he says becomes law. He is their football, their religion, their war dance. But his demands are what you would expect from somebody who was privileged enough to spend time attending colleges in Europe while developing a savvy personality."

"Admittedly, his people bought him the ticket to the top academies. His bravery has been demonstrated on the battlefield

being a descendant of a proud Zulu tribal offshoot. That meant a few skirmishes with other tribal chiefs firing the occasional arrow. It was just a theatrical stage act."

"Are you belittling him, Tom?"

"Absolutely not. Just saying it straight. In the mind of his people, his endeavor and mark of courage, are held at much higher regard than the marks he obtained from the education establishments in Europe. Also, I might add, without being demeaning of his deadly combats; they never amounted to more than a handful of broken arrows and damaged shields."

"So are we dealing with a formidable asset here. An intellectual?"

"Not more than you and me," replies Tom.

"We will need to acquire the land, lock stock and barrel and secure exclusive mining, drilling and mineral rights. Call it Neo Colonialism. Thank God we are out of the EU, Frank. Can you imagine, a tiny country in the EU, wanting to do some grandstanding to capture the limelight? And by the way, there are many of them who would want to do that. In this case, unfortunately I might add, we will still have the British Press to contend with.

Good God, at least the owners of the land will get paid top dollars."

"Am I boring you Frank?"

"No Tom, I have a weakness and I am susceptible to headaches especially when I need to concentrate on a long discussion, one which I think holds not much hope. But I love the British accent and that makes it bearable - just. C'mon Tom, give me the juice."

"With that background he expects a fat Swiss Bank Account. And a little city-like development in this Central African jungle landscaped with all modern facilities. It must include, at minimum, a bowling alley which consumes his favorite pastime."

"Think of it as a one-city State. Kind of like Washington DC, much bigger in size but microscopic in power. Yet, full of pride, clean streets, cars for all, shopping malls, the usual trappings, a high-rise structure to add to the symbolism."

"The King would live in his own private mansion but nothing ostentatious. So, he still will be seen and loved by all his followers - a total of 15,000 people including 10 tribal chiefs who make up his Council."

"Total cost \$5 billion to set it up, an annual stipend as homage and about \$150,000,000 yearly in royalties. That cost will be spread over a ten-year period. We will have approval to dig a hole deeper than the final depth reached by a whale's turd after it hits the ocean floor."

"Very descriptive, Tom. I have to say, I am very impressed."

"Yes, I thought you would be, the price is reasonable and impressive enough," replies Tom.

"I was talking about your descriptive acumen."

"Oh that, it's just a product of Eton. Never on the syllabus. It is something you learn by pure observation if you ever attend such institutions. It is driven by the need to come out on top on every argument or debate you get involved in. Reminiscent of the good old Boris. What do you think, Frank?"

"Of course, the U.S. will be interested from a security point of view and we never let threats go by without addressing them head on," replies Rupentine.

"'Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum! I smell the blood of a Chinaman.' Is that what you're thinking, Frank?"

“No, I think that it’s you who are smelling the blood of an American man – to the tune of \$4 billion dollars.”

“That’s true, look at me straight in the eyes. In the past I have been called ‘a kind of a visionary’ – not a complete one, though. Look at me, Frank, are you with me?”

“I’m looking, I’m looking and I am with you, Tom, you start to scare me now, that look on your face is so cutting, deep and serious.”

“That’s exactly what it is. I can almost guarantee that this investment will make America top dog again. Russia will find its place with us, under a new alliance. China and North Korea are the real threats. You will make a name for yourself unequaled in history since Ghandhi.”

“Where is all this vision coming from? No offense meant, but what gives you the right to say all this to me with such conviction,” asks Frank with a genuine puzzled look on his face.

“You just have to believe me, it’s this bomb – the M.D.A.”

“Okay, if it’s that good, then do continue.”

"You will turn the whole world order on its head, upside down, sideways, any which way you like to describe it. There will be a totally new global order, old regimes will fall, new ones will come to the surface, some old alliances will just disappear others will be born, but America will always be at the helm. Our Country just has not got that muscle. You have it."

Frank seems to be exasperated but certainly interested and wants to hear more. "This is overwhelming, let's walk to the buggy and continue this tête-à-tête, albeit one way."

"I am so proud to say that we may not have the ultimate muscle, but the brains are still anchored in this little country of ours we call the U.K., the Old Britannia. In saying that, I almost feel guilty I am giving it away. But this Country of ours that I dearly love is not on steroids. Assuming you accept, we will stay away from them and keep it clean."

"Tom, do keep it clean. There is nothing like good clean living, not unlike the splendid English countryside where I intend to spend lots of my time after my second term is over. It would be very different from Washington or Nevada."

“Back to the M.D.A., nobody, and I mean nobody will be able to touch our two countries or our European partners for the next hundred years. That is my prediction.”

“Oh, by the way Frank, with regards to our own dear European partners, they will contribute towards the \$5 billion and make up for their overdue NATO contributions.”

“And you are comfortable that your prediction will come to pass?”

“Being comfortable is an understatement. I guarantee it will happen, like my passing. You’re the only one who can do this, Frank. The EU keeps shooting itself in the foot and most of the time they don’t know which way is up. What do you expect? The EU is run by much smaller European states whose heads permanently point at Europe while their hands look the other way, palms open and switch positions with monotonous regularity between South-East Asia and Europe. Not all of them I must add. They have no more clout than membership status, but that’s a lot of power in a democratic union. Especially when they are given a loudspeaker and a high platform to garner attention - all for

the sake of political correctness, education and a seemingly unified Europe.”

Rupentine tries to stall the assault from this heavy word-shelling bombardment. “Your speech is Churchill-type, motivational and inspirational, the like of which I have never experienced before. I do understand the concept and I am all for it but how could I deliver. The Presidency, this one no exception, is limited to two terms and on something as ambitious as this, I predict hurdles will be bigger than 10-meter waves.”

Tom, has his eyes fixed on his swing position and continues, “You have six more years to get the Dragon knocked out for the count of 10 or six more years to lose another 15% of your country to foreign influences.” Then, whack, Tom hits the ball, follows its trajectory and then looks at Frank who is chewing things over. “Think about it, Frank, which Legacy would you prefer to leave?”

They both pause and take time for reflection. Rupentine looks far into the distance admiring the countryside, perhaps thinking ahead of happy retirement days to come. But Tom is more

focused seemingly sharpening up his next line.

“Frank, no nuclear explosion, no pollution, no contamination, world order turned upside down.”

In a perfect British accent, Frank replies, “More is less huh? How’s that?”

Tom, sensing the weight of his verbal assault, decides to ease off a little. But he is also genuinely and pleasantly surprised listening to Frank’s observation delivered in a most pleasing British accent that he has consistently kept throughout the course of this conversation.

“Good God, Frank, that’s a perfect British accent. I love that and you have maintained that just about throughout the whole of this conversation. Where did you pick that from?”

“It’s the result of a love affair with British Drama.”

Tom suspects the compliment will be music to Frank’s ears and he is correct. Seeing a new twinkle in Frank’s eyes he gets on the attack again. “Refocusing – complete destruction of enemy forces, most silos gone, no nuclear reactors, no more missile tests around the Korean peninsula or long-range ones landing a

few miles off the East Coast, in the Caribbean.”

“Where does this destruction take place?”

“China and its ally North Korea! Land, seaborne assets and overseas infrastructure particularly on the African Continent. I guarantee you will never run out of targets. The dragon is taking us over, bit by bit. United States, Europe, Africa, the world, except Russia. The Soviets are arms rich, cash poor. The Dragon must be stopped at the first opportunity.”

“Think of the plummeting money markets in London, Tokyo, Seoul and New York? Share Markets diving down into the abyss. Business and Trade?”

“Only paper money, Frank. We did well before the Dragon raised its head. The shareholders hold ninety percent of tangible wealth. The average Joe is still struggling... everywhere.”

“So, what are we talking about here, I mean what is this miracle mineral?”

“LFM091X. Latin. Liquefactum Minerali,” brags Tom Hawkins.

“Were you studying to become a priest? What the fuck was that?”

“Frank, I notice one word was out of order.”

“Yes, I have been using that expletive more often these last few days.”

“It’s not the word or its usage, it’s the pronunciation. You deviated from the pure British Upper Class accent aka Eton accent to the Liverpool intonation, albeit for only one word. You said fook not fac. You’re a football fan, Frank?”

“Interesting observation, there, Tom. But you are holding the President of the United States hostage to the best way to say fook or fac. If the Press gets a scent of this, both of us will be toast ready to be crunched and munched as soon as it pops out of the media toaster. And both of us will be fooked or fucked. So move on before I swing this fooking wood on you.”

“Anyway what the fuck, you’re right, Frank. Last thing I want to do is upset you. We call it Melt Down Agent – M.D.A. for short. It is simple yet complex but not complicated. Note the difference between the two words. If you agree, our man will brief your Defense chiefs in DC next week.”

“I expect that you would have to talk with the powers to be in Virginia. To that extent, we can send Sir Jerome

Beddington, an old aristocrat as you can imagine.”

“With a name like that, how can he be anything but. The visit will help me get ear practice. It will further my advancement in pursuing my drama career after my second term is over.”

“Frank, you’re a witty so-and-so. Unusually, Beddington is very intelligent, so don’t judge him by his stiff upper lip accent. He studied physics at Oxford but turned his back on academia and was attracted to the intrigue of politics as he put it. Sir Jerome has been a member of the Lords for the last 20 years. He has lots of close contacts with British industry and he certainly knows which side his bread is buttered.”

“Agree. Let’s hit some balls now,” says Frank. “Oh before we do that, those two words – Complex and Complicated, what’s the difference?”

“Simple, complicated is unnecessarily complex.”

“Okay, I see, or do I?” muses Frank.

01/29/2026. TALL, SLENDER and leaning on a polished cane, Sir Jerome Beddington enters the Oval Office. He is in awe and does not try to hide it. In attendance is

Rupentine, Jack Steiner and Ed Fingerton, Director of the CIA. They all extend a warm hand.

“Thank you gentlemen, for having me. A different discipline and solemnity from our chaotic Cabinet in London and in the House itself.”

He switches cane from right to left and shakes hands.

“This is the seat of power. Back in London I tap my cane once and immediately I get served tea; three times and I get scones with it. I expect it’s coffee here?”

“Sir Jerome, one tap or three taps?” asks Rupentine.

“Good God, three taps please. Indeed, Whitehall was absolutely correct. The perfect British accent. America is indeed always prepared to handle anything that’s thrown at her. Even scones I might add. Tasty relic from the old colonial days.”

They all chuckle.

“So tell us about this new discovery, Sir Jerome.”

“The British have been in the still-to-be-named-state of Sukopia east of Congo proper, for the last 180 years -

missionaries, medics, teachers, small clinics, all the basics. The most precious mineral in the world right now is LFM091X. - ."

He sips tea.

"- known as M.D.A. - Melt Down Agent and located exclusively in this 100-by-100-miles strip of land. Nowhere else in the world is such pure quality to be found."

"Sir Jerome," interrupts Ed Fingerton, "at the CIA we never heard of this mineral."

"As they say, Mr. Fingerton, you can't win them all. With the guidance of a laser or multi-lasers, the M.D.A. system will create and paint the footprint of a target for vaporization. The co-ordinates would have been either fed in the firing satellite from one of our earth stations or obtained directly by satellite imagery; by that I mean one satellite feeds another. The footprint will be obliterated, vaporized literally, irrespective of where on earth or what the composition of that surface is -."

"Sir Jerome, excuse me for interrupting, but what materials are resistant to it?" enquires Jack Steiner.

"- my dear old chap, I am happy you asked that question. Indeed, from

concrete structures to tungsten used in the building of the strongest aircraft carriers, reinforced concrete, high intensity steel, aluminium or a combination of these."

They all listen attentively. Rupentine scribbles on a pad.

"Effectively, it generates great heat but no nuclear explosion; it is tailored to destroy anything made to measure, so to speak, but minimizes human loss, unless you hit a carrier."

"It can therefore neutralize anything from an aircraft carrier, supporting craft, land-based defense systems, a whole army, air forces, buildings and structures, you name it, it takes it out!"

"What is our equivalent Jack? Was it Idaho?"

"We had some experience with a mineral found south of the Canadian border but of very low yield and effectiveness. It is too costly to drill and mine and will open up a Pandora box for environmentalists. Also, something you feel passionate about. You prefer that the lid on that box stays down."

Frank acknowledges that it is meant as a compliment.

“What do we know about Russia and China, Ed?” asks Rupentine.

“Nothing from China, presumably they will be waiting for somebody’s blueprints. The Russians have been doing all kinds of experimentation on minerals including one that we have looked at, but our understanding is, they made no headway.”

Sir Jerome butts in, “By the way, the North Koreans have also been experimenting but again we feel they are waiting to see where and who they can hack. They have dedicated teams though, who are very intelligent, young crop of people who we know are continuously testing in their underground laboratories. They have been working on something similar but we don’t know what mineral or material they are experimenting with. The objective however, seems to be similar.”

“This intel is available to us from one of our 007s who is in close contact with a South Korean agent. This agent is madly in love with our fair skinned females. He spends most of his time romancing in London. So we know his sweet spot, if you allow me to say so.”

Rupentine smiles.

“He has supplied some valuable information from time to time. If some

breakthrough comes through, we will be in touch particularly if it has to do with what we're discussing or A.I. Chips."

"Double Agent?" interjects Rupentine.

"He's all ours, he is a fine chappie. He drops by with intel bringing with him some fine piece as you Americans say. God knows how much the Department pays for that - the piece that is. And me, I am just paying the taxes. They don't even pay for my cane."

"You got plenty of time Sir Jerome, I'm afraid I haven't got that luxury."

"Oh yes, back to our Korean friend, he comes in, takes out his Columbo-sized notebook - exactly the size the North Korean Generals use for their scribble when in the prestigious company of their Dear Leader. He informs us that the North Koreans are very far behind on this type of weapon."

"His name is Jake Lee Chung-ho. Even MI6 haven't as yet figured out whether his name is written left to right or right to left."

"What about the Russians?" asks Rupentine.

"Our Intel tells us the Soviets are mining and developing an inferior mineral

in Siberia. They took up weapon development two years ago but we believe they are relatively advanced. The Chinese are talking to the Russians right now, literally begging on their knees to join."

"A fresh one Sir Jerome?"

"Good God, please. The President of the United States asks a humble British Civil Servant if he'd like another cup of tea. That was an excellent cuppa, Darjeeling, maybe Earl Grey both of them favoured by our beloved Royal Family. By the way Grey is spelt with an 'e' in this instance."

Sir Jerome pauses for a few seconds.

Rupentine looks at Sir Jerome, "They're waiting."

"Waiting, Sir?" asks Sir Jerome with a puzzled look.

"Remember, three taps?"

"Mr. President, you are certainly Oxford material, as cunning as a fox, a compliment of course, here we go, tap, tap, tap."

"We invite you to join us before we get muscled out by a joint Sino-Soviet endeavor."

"Now the bomb itself - Satellite imagery. It's complex. All in this sealed

document – what I have in my hand is the Champagne. Uncork it, if you want to celebrate.”

“Perfect delivery Sir Jerome. Pass this note to Tom please. It says ‘Done Deal’ – only if I can get it past my Chiefs. Where are you heading now?”

“Re-visiting monuments in DC.”

“Secret Service are at your command.”

They shake hands. Rupentine’s grip feels like a vice.

“Thank you, Mr. President. One request if I may – the scones’ recipe. For my wife. She’ll love that. Top Secret perhaps?”

Rupentine bursts out laughing. Jack’s is more controlled.

“Sir Jerome, it’s been really lovely having you.”

“Yes, thank you Mr. President, hopefully we will see you at the signing ceremony. Would you be calling it the 51st State, perhaps 52nd? These numbers always tend to confuse my unpretentious mind.”

“Be patient, Sir Jerome, wait till we get it.”

Chapter 11

Signing of the Sukopia Agreement. It fuels the M.D.A. weapon.

11

The signing ceremony takes place on February 2nd, 2026. Tom Hawkins, Jack Steiner and three lawyers wait for King Abba Salam Kasongo. Impeccably dressed in an Italian suit, he enters the room. His two female bodyguards, superbly fit wearing dark glasses follow him. The king takes his seat at the table as a ceremony official stands by.

Leather bound Agreements with an embossed title: 'Sukopia Agreement Chequers London February 2nd 2026' lie closed in front of them, each next to an iPad sized digital device with 3 distinct buttons.

The basic monetary terms are as follows.

\$3 billion to be held in trust by Swiss Bank as a Sovereign Fund. This amount will be deposited today immediately upon the signing of the agreement.

\$2 billion will be designated over the next 10 years to fund and develop Sukopia City with an ambitious architectural plan to be supplied by the British Architectural Firm Burton Meadows Architects.

The King, on behalf of the Country's coffers will receive on average \$150 million per annum as royalties to help fund further infrastructure.

The King's personal account will be topped with an annuity of \$12,000,000. It will be deposited in a Swiss Bank Account with the yearly amounts to be extended to his successor upon his passing.

The Official stands in front of the dignitaries, "Good morning gentlemen. Keep the forefinger of your right hand pressed on the middle button. The microcomputer will read your biometrics, takes your picture and once synchronized, a message will appear to 'Release' - Press the button now, Go."

After 15 seconds, he continues...

"Now, it's casino time. The numbers roll on, topping up the deposit vault of

Sukopia at the Alles Banque de Geneve. The readout reaches the magic number of three followed by nine zeros. All buttons to be pressed simultaneously.”

Tom continues to steal glances at the female bodyguards. One of them responds with a faint smile. He looks at her while his finger presses hard on the button at the same time giving his finger a slight wiggle. The young lady, her cheeks pumped up, is ready to burst out laughing. Tom now beams a smile from ear to ear.

All signatures are now on the documents, they exchange a few words, smile and shake hands on the deal.

FEW MONTHS HAVE gone by since the Chequers signing. Jack Steiner examines the vast development in Sukopia from an Air Force helicopter equipped with High Definition Infrared Camera. Also, a photographer clicks his Leica M11 at fast speeds. Destruction and construction. Huge airstrip, half-completed roads, buildings and an open mining site which looks like a collection of craters from Mars surrounded by cranes and heavy mining equipment. He sends a message to his President.

Mr. President, I hope you're getting the

real-time feed of the mining development showing the birth of a new city. Don't worry, I have it all on tape with stacks of photographs.

The next day, Jack sees Rupentine in the Oval Office.

"Mr. President, I understand you were tied up at the time. These are aerial photographs of Sukopia with the city only partly-finished."

"Nice shot, new roads to the airport and the new runway. What's this square building?"

"Mini Nuclear Reactor, Sir."

"I love clean energy. Ouch, this looks like the mining operation. - Jesus."

"Compared to the Chinese mining sites, hundred miles away, ours is pristine."

"Maybe not pristine enough. What have we got here? Construction of roads. Whoa. Lots of dynamite activity. It looks like World War II. - God. I can't look at these, Jack. Take them away and file them. For Christ's sake I ran on a message to save the world."

"Respectfully Sir, no pain no gain."

"Don't let any Chinese camera-in-the-sky anywhere near there. Shoot it down if

you have to. I'm not talking just about balloons here. They will make a feast out of this. Okay Jack, thanks for the good news. Come and see me as soon as we have the bomb."

Around the Shetlands, British Air Force jets pound old shipwrecks floating on the surface of the water or half-submerged. Huge balls of fire soon evaporate in the misty air leaving complete charred remains.

In Nevada, near Area-51, old tanks and rusty vehicles are hit but there are no visible attacking aircraft in the perfectly clear sky. A few minutes later, a second wave of bombing follows, this time action is clearly visible in the air.

F-16s make several low passes over new targets, old abandoned tanks and vehicles. They pound them with M.D.A. pellets turning them into cinders. Soon military personnel arrive on the spot. They inspect the effect of the new incendiary and point to the accuracy and burnt footprints of the toasted wrecks.

In the West Sitting Hall, Celine is engrossed in a novel and did not notice Rupentine walking in. He seems quiet on the outside, but on the inside, he feels like a wreck.

At the Nevada Monitoring Center the medical alert watches worn by Meredith and Brown explode in a burst of activity and it makes them leap to their monitors.

"AM I INTERRUPTING your reading Celine, you seem to be engrossed in that."

"Absolutely not." She closes the book and puts it away.

"I was feeling too edgy today. Just one second please, Jack's on the line."

"M.D.A. tested. Area 51. Old tanks all vaporized to the last inch. They took the hits of the Satellites-driven capsule bomblets and those dropped from the F-16s. The Brits are testing on wrecks near the Shetlands. All looks good, Sir."

"Deployment?"

"Early December, 2026."

"Thank you, Jack."

"Celine, please send Pablo home early. Sandwiches will do."

"You seem to have perked up all of a sudden."

"Where is the 'Family Guy' CD?"

"Has your A.I. Chip been consumed, eaten away, gone mushy or has the plate slipped off your head, which one?"

“Still in place. C’mon Stewie, ma man.”

She walks out slamming the door. Frank feels good but sulks while he admires Stewie’s evil eyes and facial aggression.

At the Monitoring Center, Meredith is getting somewhat worried, “Thomas, decrease his aggression. He is running hot again.”

“God, another few years of this shit.”

Then Rupentine calms down and welcomes Celine who comes in with his sandwiches, “Thank you... as usual darling, these are really nice sandwiches. Your hands are steady, at times, I am just a bundle of nerves.”

Frank feels in a much better mood the next day. It is three-thirty in the afternoon. The reporters wait patiently as Rupentine walks in. He is all pumped up.

“Good afternoon. I will keep this brief. The economy is going great guns, employment is up and rising, the markets are in a buoyant mood, the polls look good. We continue to focus. Our foreign policy is under control. Progress is being made on Climate Change.”

“China is not helping much,” yells a reporter.

“Patience is a virtue. If needs be, we are prepared to turn on the screws.”

“Meaning what, Mr. President?”

“Happy to go the distance. Sanctions, import duties, entry visas. Better if they don’t test us. Thank you.”

A flurry of questions follows Rupentine who hurries back making his way to the Oval Office.

In the Nevada Office, Meredith and Brown closely observe his behavior.

“He is seeing red today. The fix is becoming overdue, Thomas,” says Milton.

“The code transfer will knock him out.”

“The problem is the Press. I believe I have a solution!”

“Do I need to know?” asks Thomas Brown.

“Possible ethical reasons. Better stay out of it. It should be fine.”

In his Chicago office Jeremiah takes a call while he spins his basketball.

“Thomas, what’s happening?”

“Frank is becoming a real danger; he needs a heavy software change. It will knock him out for 3 days.”

"Uh... Fine... Okay. Make sure you have a clear answer ready for the Press."

Thomas Brown dials Dr. Koch.

"Tim, action as discussed the other day. *Go.*"

"Celine on March 23rd, Frank, 26th. He will be ready to deliver his Easter Message on 29th."

Celine answers an expected call from Dr. Koch, "Yes Doctor, six-thirty should be fine. Okay for today, the 22nd."

She continues to watch the news and soon afterwards, Dr. Koch shows up.

"Come through, Tim. Pablo, please meet Dr. Koch, the President's physician. He keeps an eye on Frank's diet."

Pablo looks surprised.

"Lots of cheese, salt, anything heavy?"

"Everything in moderation, Doc. Salt, no touch. Mrs. Rupentine is served on a square plate. The President, on a round plate. I never mix them up."

"Excellent Pablo. Smells good. Nice fish. How long before they eat?"

"Normally seven. Another 45 minutes."

Frank walks in and greets both of them.

"You're in safe hands, Mr. President. I want to make sure your cholesterol is controlled without introducing any tablets. Go watch the news."

"Pablo, I want to give the First Lady a surprise. I will carry the tray."

"Sure, doctor. Off we go."

Dr. Koch reaches for a tiny sachet of grayish powder and sprinkles a dash on her food. He follows Pablo.

"Aha. Our new chef, Dr. Tim Koch," Celine exclaims.

"I will be needing a new job when mine comes to an end. You're in very good hands, Sir. I bid you good night. Enjoy the food. Thank you."

The next day, Celine feels unwell and the news is leaked to the Press. Stomach Virus.

Newspaper headlines in all cities carry a similar message: 'FIRST LADY HIT BY MYSTERIOUS ILLNESS.' And, 'FIRST LADY OUT WITH STOMACH VIRUS.'

Two days following Celine's sudden illness, Thomas Brown looks at the time. It is exactly five o'clock. He mumbles to himself.

"Energy, aggression, memory all down.

Sorry, Frank. I just had to zap you by pressing these low numbers!"

Soon after Thomas had pressed the last button, Rupentine feels extremely tired and calls Dr. Koch who promptly shows up in the Oval Office.

"Drink this, Mr. President. You have caught Celine's bug. I suggest you retire early tonight and call me if you have severe symptoms."

With the intended situation under control, Dr. Koch calls Thomas.

"Thomas, all under control, I gave him the placebo, please re-adjust his behavioral numbers. As expected, I have a few more White House calls to make, let's say another four patients, so bye for now."

In the morning there is an impromptu press briefing at the White House. Peter Petrovich takes questions from reporters.

"I am Peter Petrovich standing in for Bill Plavic. A short statement to let you know that the President is unwell today."

"What's wrong? Is he okay?" asks a reporter.

"He's fine. It's a stomach virus that's going around. As you know, the First Lady had the bug three days ago. Not serious,

it's just like any other bug, it has spread within the White House, but now it's under control."

"Anyone else?"

"Three staff. Possibly, Bill Plavic too. That's it. Better get out fast in case you catch it too. Thank you."

Within an hour, newspapers stands carry similar headlines. 'PRESIDENT DOWN. STOMACH VIRUS HITS THE WHITE HOUSE. THE FIRST LADY IS STILL RECOVERING.'

On the second day following Rupentine's stomach bug recovery, Jack Steiner, as expected, is on his way to see him.

"On my way, Sir. Hope you're feeling much better now."

In a terse voice, "I am getting impatient with the subs. Hope you found a way of sinking them."

The President ends the call.

Steiner shrugs his shoulders and continues on with his journey to the White House.

Jack Steiner walks into the Oval Office looking tense.

Meredith and Brown examine fast-changing behavioral patterns displayed on their monitors in the NIFAI's offices in Nevada.

"Jack, you look tense, that makes two of us," says Frank.

"Progress on the M.D.A. Sir, I have a long list, all in bullet form so I'll give you the juice."

"Hold on, Jack. Submarines sinkable?"

"No Sir. Not at the moment."

"Shit. When would that happen?"

"They run silent, they run deep."

"That was in the movie. We have the Chinese knocking on our doors."

"These are our present capabilities. The only office that can speed that change is this Office and Congress."

"Agree. Look for bigger spanners and use them. Don't care how, just get me the answers."

"I'm..."

"... Try harder. Is the M.D.A. working and deployable?"

"Absolutely."

"Satellites in place? Pilots trained?"

"Most certainly."

"The Brits. Same Page?"

"In perfect step with us. All good to go. You're all fired up, Sir!"

"You bet! My approval on foreign policy is down. I want to give those SOBs something to think about."

"China, North Korea and Russia?" asks Rupentine.

"With Russia - too hard I expect."

Meredith and Thomas Brown shake their heads.

The SHIM - Speech Hearing Input Monitoring Chip was switched on essentially enabling them to listen to any Presidential conversation at will. Thomas Brown seems exasperated, "Jesus Christ, that's after the new software upgrade. This is sensitive information. Shall we eavesdrop or interfere?"

"National Security!" says Milton. "Decrease aggression by 3."

As usual, the effect is almost immediate, "I am cooling down a bit now, Jack. Give me a couple more bullet points."

"One M.D.A. will toast the White House.

Three, an aircraft carrier. And a new weapon will be coming up shortly."

"Which one?"

"Bermuda Vortex. It creates a hole in the surface of the ocean and the aircraft carrier drops in it like a brick."

"Sounds unbelievable. Okay, Jack. Just crystallize a war scenario. A preemptive strike... Will we win?"

"Depends who we take on."

"Milton, he is aggressive but controlling himself for now," says Thomas.

"Okay, let's see how the conversation develops before we start tweaking," says Milton.

"Jack, I have to deliver, the second term is knocking otherwise I'm screwed. What do we need? More satellites? More firepower? What's the command line like?"

"Command Line is good; it's called the Melt Down Force. It doesn't matter how good, hitting all three at once could go nuclear."

"How long before we can sink the subs?"

"Only when they come to the surface."

But we never know when or where.”

In the Nevada monitoring office, Milton barks out to Thomas, “Lower his aggression, two notches down. Okay, it seems to be normalizing. It’s going up and down like a yo-yo.”

“You’re a great soldier. No bullshit. Let me think about it.”

Jack turns around, leaves and closes the door.

Rupentine’s eyes bulge. He clenches his fists, closes his eyes, grits his teeth and thumps his forehead repeatedly.

Frank speaks loudly but to himself. “I am going to get those assholes one way or another. Let me calm down, I have golf in half an hour.”

He calls his Chief of Staff, “James, I have golf on, get Marine One ready.”

Marine One lands on the fairway of the Columbia Country Club golf course in Maryland. Herman and Jeremiah are on the putting green. Rupentine wears a nervous smile.

“Bad day today boys. Chinese will not comply on Climate Change.”

“Your go, Sir.”

“Okay, let me line this one up. The Vortex would solve all my problems.”

“Vortex, what’s that, Sir?” asks Herman.

“It’s a new bomb, it sinks their carriers by creating a hole in the ocean.”

“I never heard of that before, but what about the subs?” says Jeremiah.

“JJ, you hit the nail right on the head. I just cannot figure out the perfect approach. I’m sorry I really have to rush back. My mind is not on golf at the moment. I cannot concentrate and I have some urgent work ahead of me.”

“There’s one last thing Mr. President. NIFAI needs some additional funds.”

“That’s the least of my problems, JJ. Defense will put another bulk order. \$200 million will be deposited and the balance on delivery, I will let Jack know. Have a good day.”

They shake hands and walk to their private choppers.

“Jeremiah, that’s a preemptive strike he’s talking about! Hopefully, he doesn’t burn us all. Call Milton.”

“Milton, I’ve just been on the Golf Course with the President. He is craving

for Lateral Thinking and it has become very urgent.”

“We thought so. We had the SHIM monitoring on him because he sounded really dangerous, bad and reckless. We’re on it. He seems to be determined on firing on something or somebody, I hope it won’t be me.”

Chapter 12

Is this the Last Waltz or the Final Waltz for Nora Carr?

12

Frank stops his buggy and waves away the people around him.

He calls Maria Ramos.

“Yes Mr. President.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Maria. Tonight, I suggest you don’t show up. It may not be pretty.”

“Whatever you say, Frank. I think I understand.”

He calls James McNaught, Chief of Staff.

“You need to wait for a go-ahead. It may or may not happen, but be prepared. In the meantime, put the plain envelope with the note inside it on her desk. Make sure it’s above the clutter. A second call means a go-ahead for the envelope with

the embossed Presidential Seal.”

“I understand. Plain envelope on her desk and then I will be standing by,” replies McNaught.

He calls the caddie who drops him by Marine One. He waves back to Herman and Jeremiah and gets on his way.

BACK IN THE Administration office, Nora sits down, opens the envelope carefully so as not to tear it but most importantly the note inside.

‘Dear Nora, things start to look real good now. Make sure you look the best of the best for tonight. I would like to have a dance. I have been practicing the waltz. Tonight. Frank.’

She looks and feels this was going to be her lucky day, even though her relationship with Frank hadn’t been that warm.

At the Washington Hilton, it is the White House Correspondents Dinner. For one reason or another it is always a night to remember, and this one proves to be no exception.

The orchestra tries to accommodate for all tastes -tango, waltz and foxtrot; the guests are having a great time swinging. One might say the mood is great. It is

getting close to the end of the evening.

The Chief of Staff approaches his boss and whispers in his ear, "Sir, your choice for the last piece of music; will it be a waltz or your Sinatra favorite 'My Way.'?"

"Waltz would be just fine, James."

"Would that be *La Valse du Petit Chien*, *The Blue Danube*, *The Waltz of the Flowers*?... well, Sir?"

"Showing my ignorance, I never heard of the first one. Heh, heh."

"It's The waltz of the little dog."

"Almost the appropriate name. No, make it 'The Last Waltz' by that singer Engel ... too difficult to pronounce!"

"Engelbert Humperdinck?"

"That's the one, that's the music, James."

Frank enjoys the penultimate piece with his wife Celine. Neither of them liked dancing all that much but Frank was maybe the better of the two at this subtle expression of graceful movements.

"Celine, you need to smile all the time while I tell you this. Remember, all the cameras are on us. I will take the final dance with Nora. Don't read anything into

it. But be cognizant of the difference between the words – Final and Last.”

Celine obliges with a serene smile and blows him a kiss.

After their dance, they mingle with other celebrities, business people, high ranking government officials and members of The House and The Senate. They are waiting for the *final* last waltz.

The evening was coming to a close and the Orchestra was getting ready to bring the curtains down on this great occasion. Was the President, as the chief conductor, about to pull some of his own strings too?

The Master of Ceremonies appears on stage to make an important announcement.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the White House Correspondents Dinner has always been and still is a great occasion. It gives the opportunity for all of us to shine and enjoy the limelight. But as expected, the lights will shine most brightly on one man, the man of the moment, the President of the United States, Mr. Frank Rupentine. He will now kindly take to the floor for ‘The Last Waltz’, this time partnered by none other than his Campaign Director, the lady who helped him get to the highest office in the Land, Nora Carr.

Let's give them a big hand."

"Nora, are you ready for a dance?" asks Frank with an inviting smirk on his face.

"I thought you would never ask."

"I have been practicing the waltz trying to perfect it like 'Gene Hackman' did in that film 'Absolute Power.' That was a great movie," says Frank.

"One of my favourite films; the way he looked at her, the way he held her; the way he bent her back as if he had a supple ballerina's body in his arms. But most of all, his flirtatious-lying smile that melts any lady away. In particular, his 'heh, heh' that accompanies every grin and smile on his face. I feel I'm in his arms right now. But tonight, I'm all yours. Can you match all those things Frank?"

"Heh, heh, and more. I understand. Here we go."

"This waltz is sending my head spinning. I never knew that you were that agile, Mr. President."

"Lots of things you don't know about me and likewise."

"What's at the top of your curiosity list, Mr. President?"

"Keep that smile on, heh, heh, just do a

gentle turn for Frank.”

“I’m not wired, Frank.”

“Please, and with a smile.”

“How’s that for a turn, Mr. President?”

“Perfect. Your twitch. I often wonder how your husband reacts to it in more private moments. I’m fascinated. Remember Nora, keep smiling.”

“Oh, that’s a bit personal Mr. President, wouldn’t you say so?”

“Absolutely, but I thought you wanted to get personal.”

“Not like that, but I will tell you.”

“Heh, heh, I’m waiting.”

“Like jelly. Do you want to hear more.”

“Oh please!” says Frank with an even broader grin.

“Like two domes of jelly with a strawberry on top of each, equal in size, experiencing a gentle tremor in Nevada. The color? That depends on whether it’s holiday season or not. By the way, I was not talking about the color of the strawberries. Now, what do you go for first, the strawberry or the jelly?”

“You said equal in size, did you mean

the strawberries or the jelly domes.”

“Oh Frank, look a bit closer. Tell me, are you going to have me?”

“I am, I am waiting for those strawberries to ripen a bit more. Heh, heh.”

“How’s my smile?” asks Nora.

“Gorgeous.”

“Fucking the president would bring you millions from the memoirs. You agree? Keep the smile on. Soon we’ll need to clap and show appreciation to the audience, our admirers shall we say.”

“Okay Frank, I am getting a bit hot after all this, let’s move to the corner, but keep smiling.”

“Heh, heh cool down! We still have a few more spins.”

“This is getting serious now Mr. President. Of late we have been at odds with each other. When you look around, surrounded by all this glamor, don’t ever forget who got you here. Even your Master of Ceremonies said that.”

“Heh, heh. I gave him the words. Nora, you’re always at the front of my mind. A peaceful co-existence with other members of the staff will ensure a second term.”

“Exactly what I think. You’re chasing a Legacy; one term is not good enough. You need to fire Maria if you want a second term.”

“Otherwise... and keep a smile on your face while discussing a serious issue such as this one... maybe it’s time for us to get off the floor away from the limelight, heh, heh, yes please continue ...”

“... otherwise, Maria will find it hard to do the job from some farmhouse in Nevada.”

“Are you trying to muscle me?”

“I said what I had to say. For the record, I don’t like you and I don’t like anybody dictating how I do my job.”

“So, what do you propose?” asks the President beaming a controlled smile.

Nora Carr gets a sudden nervous twitch but continues, “Well...”

“Oh no, not that!” says Frank.

“... Mr. President, you know that’s a nervous twitch. You’re an asshole at times, I never fucking liked you.”

“The nature of this conversation has taken a sudden unpleasant turn. If you don’t like me that much, well...”

"You don't have the balls to tell me. Like you don't have the balls to tell Maria to do her job properly because you fucking need me to be here for the next five years."

"It won't look good on your CV. Just keep smiling... for your sake."

"I don't give a fuck about my CV or yours for that matter."

Frank's smile now turns into laugh, "Ha ha ha. You know what. I just grew some balls. You... are... fired."

"Mr. President, Sir."

"Drop by in the Oval Office," says Frank with a smile.

Frank calls McNaught.

"It's go-ahead, James, embossed envelope."

AT AROUND NINE o'clock the next morning, Nora Carr walks briskly into the Administration area and heads towards her desk. All staff were at their desks, heads down seemingly working but stealing looks at Nora as she walks past them.

A neatly packed box sits on her chair. Her desk looks polished as if it had just been delivered on the floor. Not one

fingerprint on the glass top. It is clear of all paper and stationery with the exception of an envelope.

Addressed: "From the President to Nora." She opens it. Inside, a one-word note on Presidential letterhead: '*Goodbye.*' Signed: Frank Rupentine.

She inserts the letter back in the envelope and with some pomp she places it exactly in the center of the glass top.

With a steely face, she turns around. A White House security officer politely sees her out. She gets in the car, tears trickling down her face.

The phone rings. James McNaught, Chief of Staff is on the line.

"Yes James."

"We have a recording of Nora at her desk. Would you like to see it?"

"No James, thank you. In all honesty it was a rather traumatic experience. I am sure you have done an excellent job. Keep an eye open for some fresh blood."

Chapter 13

*Trinitas computer compromised. July 4th
Debacle. War Strategy.*

13

The atmosphere in the Nevada Monitoring Office is edgy, and for a very good reason too.

Thomas Brown is a bundle of nerves, continuously biting his fingernails, pulling hairs out of his nostrils, indiscriminately plucking his eyebrows then running his fingers or what's left of them through his hair.

A tense and panicky routine of a man gripped by fear of failure, a process repeated with perfect execution and timing but to no avail. The Presidency could be blown apart if the NIFAI presidential robotic creation had been compromised by Kamov. The trusted NIFAI director turns rogue and Brown himself decides to punish him in a very unusual and unorthodox way for sins

committed. That was a few days ago though.

He calls Conan Docherty, Kamov's subordinate and now his replacement, but a much less panicky merchant than his boss Thomas Brown.

"It's Thomas here, give me a quick update."

"Part of Trinitas, Unit One shut down after the tremor we had the other day. IBM engineers discovered corrupt code but all is okay now. Kamov had corrupted the code but the good news is that we know which part of the code had been compromised. I thought you knew all that."

"I thought you may have found something else, maybe more sinister."

"Nothing so far, but how did you handle it?"

"We're looking at it. With the security compromised I had to take meaningful action. We set up a sting and it netted another two of our guys. They are all under house arrest. Kamov gambled a lot and was blackmailed by the Russians. It involved a sex circus with two of his brothers who own the Makarov Electronics firm with their Chinese

partners. Two dozen Russians and ten Chinese have since been deported and the factory has been shut down.”

“So, what happened to Kamov, can we get him here to show us exactly what code he tampered with?”

“Not possible. He was put in a coma, then arrested and charged.”

“Where is he now?”

“Dead. Suicided. I am currently assessing security. Let me know pronto if new bad code shows up.”

Jacko Weiner is twenty-five years old, sober for some of the time but often not. He is at his brilliant best when his feet are on the ground. Thomas Brown, his boss, tells him to keep his feet glued to the tarmac for the next few days.

Together they examine thousands of lines of computer code but come to a dead end. They could not figure out a bunch of lines that made absolutely no sense not even to most mathematicians.

At NIFAI they had the best of the best even though some of them follow a lifestyle not easily embraced by the majority. Most are straight thinking clean-living individuals who never rattle anything in their lives and are considered

exceptions to be found in this world often open to high intrigue.

Thomas Brown rings Milos Puskas.

“Milos, get your ass in my office right now. On the double.”

Milos is in his mid-forties and a pure maths scientist. He walks into the office. Slim, thick black-rimmed glasses, bow tie and braces, and always known to be clean.

“Sit down. You are super intelligent, prove it to me, what do you make of these numbers, codes and formulae?”

Thomas Brown nervously paces the floor stopping every six feet to bump his head gently on the wall – another exhibit of a compulsive nervous ritual.

“I am sure, I am looking at telephone numbers, pass me Kamov’s cell phone please.”

Jacko promptly passes the phone. Milos examines it, punches in some numbers, gets some weird answering signals back and then he spits out the unwelcome news.

“Bad news. Kamov’s number matches one of the numbers I deciphered. They are probably Russian, Kremlin perhaps.”

Weiner butts in, "They can implement tweaking. The other number is the IP address for the front-end microprocessor which feeds the instructions to the main computer, Trinitas."

"Son of a bitch," yells Brown. "We have been compromised. Thank you, gentlemen. Leave it with me and keep this under your hats."

Still in the Nevada Monitoring Office, Milton and Thomas monitor Rupentine.

Both are waiting for the speech by the President, one of the most anticipated occasions on the calendar.

It is the 4th of July.

Rupentine walks down the corridors of power and into the beautiful sunshine. The South Lawn, yet again, looks like a picture-perfect postcard as he welcomes the crowd to the White House grounds.

He is flanked by the First Lady and Jack Steiner. Dr. Koch stands some distance away behind the President.

He feels more like a Secret Service Agent than a neurosurgeon. His earpiece buzzes with a message from Thomas Brown, "Tim, have a calming tablet handy."

Dr. Koch speaks into his lapel. "Got it, already dissolved."

Frank starts his address well and stays on script.

"... we continue working with the youth of this Country on Climate Change. We are also talking to the Chinese on this issue and a number of others."

The crowd applauds modestly.

Frank starts to appear stern.

"Tim, pass him the glass, *now*," whispers Brown.

Dr. Koch walks calmly towards the President and passes him the glass of water which he downs quickly.

"... but we need to step it up. We *just cannot* be nice forever."

Then he thumps his fist on the lectern.

"The time has arrived. We should look them in the eyes and tell them without mincing any words."

He waves his index finger to emphasise his next sentence.

"That is more than enough."

Now Rupentine decides to ignore the Teleprompter.

“And to the North Koreans. Your missiles are running on vapor. To the Russians, get out of the Ukraine and stop endangering world peace. We can still act unilaterally and deal a simultaneous blow to all our enemies.”

He thumps the lectern again and again.

“With or without the UN’s meddling.”

All of a sudden Rupentine appears shaken. He holds tightly on to the lectern. But a huge smile returns.

“All I am saying, please, let’s work together, but we can also play tough.”

The crowd applauds enthusiastically and the President waves back.

“God bless America.”

“Bitch!” explodes Milton. “That’s the big Russian hack. You got to clean the system, Thomas.”

Rupentine rolls his brief, gives the crowd a final wave, smiles, and walks down the hall to the Oval Office.

He slams the door shut, grits his teeth and lets the paper fly all over. He calms down, picks them up, squares them neatly, places them on his desk and calls Dr. Meredith.

"Milton, I made an ass of myself. My head says one thing, my heart something else."

"Probably a panic attack, Sir. Tim Koch will prescribe some medication. Some mild fever, perhaps. Rather unfortunate, Mr. President."

"Rupentine... A weak ass? Ready to crumble? Milton. *Fix* it."

"Yes Sir. Would that be all?"

"Have a good day."

A few days later, the President is on Marine One travelling to Edwards. He calls Jack Steiner.

"Jack - the latest on the M.D.A."

"Both weapons have been perfected."

"Anti-submarine capabilities?"

"No progress."

"Do you think we can make a dent?"

"Negative, not during your second term, Sir."

"Damn," exclaims Rupentine.

"We still have the overall edge. Assuming we can destroy most of their silos and mobile missiles we're in good shape as long as it's just two nations."

“Jack, you’re going to sink me like a fucking submarine that comes to the surface. You will go down before I do.”

Frank Rupentine pauses for a few seconds.

“We need a new war scenario. Bye.”

RUPENTINE STRUGGLES TO fall asleep. He looks at his watch. It is two in the morning. He rolls out of bed, kneels down, starts to pray but climbs back in bed soon afterwards. Ten minutes later he wakes up gasping for breath.

Celine walks into his room.

“What’s the matter? Stomach virus?”

“No Celine. Violent dreams. Carriers swallowed by the oceans, hailstones turning into fiery balls, burnt bodies strewn around. I must pray.”

Celine leaves the room as Rupentine kneels by his bed.

“Forgiving, loving and praying for our enemies is Christ-like. Being gracious, merciful to others and showing compassion are my deep-rooted beliefs. I am on the edge of this precipice. An unfathomable gorge, bottomless and endless with glimpses of infernal regions deep below. Eager and ready to swallow

me. And the possible destruction of God's beautiful creation. Planet Earth."

He breathes out a sigh of relief.

"Help me Lord."

He feels relieved and turns the recorder off, then presses the TV channel buttons on his remote relentlessly as if in a loop but settles on CNN.

"...Leading the news on Sunday. A Chinese drone shot down by a U.S. missile near the Congo. North Korea test fires more missiles. Skirmishes on the Korean border. Not a happy day. This is Peter Sacco for CNN, New York."

At the Nevada Monitoring Center, Meredith and Brown monitor a press conference with the President at the lectern on a solo performance fielding aggressive questions.

On the monitors, his behavioral pattern appears to be showing some nasty gaps.

"Milton, increase his aggression by 2."

Rupentine continues to take questions.

"... That's a good question. We warned them not to encroach on Sukopia's air space to avoid repercussions. Three drones were chased away by our F-16s... with one down."

"Who gave the orders to shoot?" asks a second reporter.

"I did."

At the Nevada Center, Milton thinks this media briefing is heading south. He yells at Thomas Brown, "Thomas, some tougher questions coming up. Turn his aggression up a bit. He looks a bit meek; he needs to sound sharper and more aggressive. Otherwise, they're going to chew him up."

"Did you think of repercussions?" asks a reporter.

Rupentine points his finger to his forehead. "It's always mapped in here."

"Are the U.S. forces under immediate threat?"

"If that happens, it will only last for a day... two at most. Thank you."

"Are you very confident Mr. President?"

"Always. Speak softly and carry a big stick. However, I am past speaking softly."

"Thomas, he is back to normal but as usual he is scaring me."

THE PRESIDENT IS by himself on the Potomac Golf Club in Washington. He

prepares for a bunker shot, the third one for the day, when he gets a call from Jack Steiner.

"The North Koreans just tested an improvised ICBM. It landed in Japanese waters and the Allies are worried."

"You said North Koreans? SOBs."

"Their troops are massing on the borders. Chinese state of readiness is increasing. Likewise their war games in the South China Sea. That's it."

"Right now I'm in the bunker. A new war strategy Jack!"

"Sir, your options narrow to just one. North Korea first. We will use sub-standard force, this will draw the Chinese, then hit both with all we've got. The main and immediate turning point is the Bermuda Vortex versus the Carriers."

"How's that Jack? Give me some more."

"No M.D.A.s. We will use F-16s, F-35s and the F-22s for heavy hitting and we will also use decoys. We will lose a few decoys - intentionally. I would say ten decoys at minimum. The Koreans will have their field day. We will still be able to inflict a lot of damage though. China will take heart by our losses and will be lured into the conflict."

“What if China doesn’t take the bait?”

“We will hit anything floating in the Straights with North Korean flags irrespective of how close they are to the Chinese fleet. At that point, China will move, if not, we inflict some damage on their boats. As soon as they move on any of our assets or move on Taiwan or prepare to launch at us, that’s the time we’ll show our cards.”

“But the Panda may not move, in the meantime North Korea decides to launch missiles aimed at Seoul,” says Rupentine.

“Sir, our Aegis Weapons System based on land, in Japan and Seoul and on navy assets, would be used to take out incoming threatening missiles. Remember our AWACs will be monitoring 24/7.”

“No other way, sir. Showing our winning cards on the first North Korean strike will ensure that China will not get involved, they will stay out of it and will spend their time developing their own M.D.A. That’s another five years – you will be out of office by then. As I understand it, that’s not what you want.”

“Very true,” was Rupentine’s reluctant answer. The President continues, “Suppose we miss, and one of those missiles gets through – Seoul?”

“Based on our intelligence of their current capabilities that would be highly unlikely.”

“But if it does?”

“We would have to accept that as cost of war, keeping the bigger picture in focus.”

“God help us if it’s nuclear,” says Rupentine.

“God help us all. However, we would know if the missile is armed with a nuclear warhead and if so, we have other means, i.e. destroy it with traditional force before it clears the ground.”

“Can the whole conflict get nuclear?”

“It could, but I doubt it. Our intel should be able to shed light on the Chinese state of readiness, preparations and intentions. If it seems to be coming to that, then we’ll have to show our hand immediately, meaning a first strike on China even before they trip the switch.”

HERMAN KRAUT IS in the TSM office. He is in a pensive mood and calls Thomas Brown in Nevada.

“I put two hundred million dollars on this man and Jeremiah another two hundred. Who the fuck is running the

show. NIFAI? The President? His polls are dipping. They should be holding steady.”

“We noticed that. We adjusted his behavior a few times. We’ll keep trying.”

“We must ensure a new democratic president is elected after he goes. He needs more aggression, needs to go on the offensive and he needs to show he’s still in charge. More creativity.”

“None of the adjustments are holding, Herman. He needs something more drastic.”

“For fuck’s sake, give it to him, then.”

“Right now, as we speak, we have a monitor on him and also we have the SHIM on. We’ll get back to you.”

In the Nevada Monitoring Office both Meredith and Brown use the SHIM earpiece which has now become the norm. Concerns as to whether it’s ethically right or wrong have long been thrown out of the window.

THE PRESIDENT IS with Jack Steiner on East Potomac Golf Course in Washington.

“Give me the new plan, Jack.”

“Bottom line. Taking the three of them at once guarantees a no-win.”

“That was my fear. I need to fix it.”

“Mr. President. The subs are out. Can’t touch them. Anything that’s a threat – nuclear or otherwise we hit from our satellites with the M.D.A.s, likewise we will use the F-16s, or F-35s for the more stationary targets or those which do not offer a first strike threat.”

“And you say Jack, ...?”

“Pick two. The Panda and the Bear together will not compute.”

In Nevada, Thomas tells Milton, “Make him think outside the square.”

Milton mumbles to himself, “Increase Acerbic by 2, now let’s see Mr. President, make sure your buddy Milton sitting here sweating his ass off in Nevada is not wasting his time.”

“Satellites in geostationary orbit will handle all mobile launchers,” continues Steiner.

“The Brits and NATO take on Russia?”

“No. Europe will be destroyed.”

“Come on Jack, smile. You’re still my greatest asset.”

Meredith and Thomas Brown exchange fist bumps.

"Sir ... you cannot put 10 pounds of shit in a five-pound bag. - ."

"- It will burst. Well put Jack, hold on, let me scribble a note."

Frank ponders for a few seconds.

"Fuck this. Play politics and follow archaic lines? Fuck that. Read between lines of the Constitution? Fuck that too. Not if I believe that missiles are about to fly."

"Not following, Sir."

Frank continues mumbling to himself.

"Oh yes. Terms of Surrender, God, I feel guilt inside me as soon as I say that, something in my make-up."

Both Milton and Thomas scratch their heads. "This is a moral dilemma. How much we should monitor and how deeply we get involved. We could end up in jail."

"Good place to be for reflection Milton, I suppose we can just let him roll along."

"Exactly Tom. Status Quo, wait for his next move, that's all we can do."

"I feel he is in for some sleepless nights," says Milton. "Either you or me will need to keep an eye on what he is up to during the next few days. I will take the

first night shift Tom, you handle the one tomorrow. I will be taking a couple of hours' nap soon. What a bitch!"

Chapter 14

Ukraine. G7 changes. World order is shaken.

14

It is two in the morning. Rupentine tosses and turns in his bed. It looks like another sleepless night is ahead.

Meanwhile on the West Coast under the Black Rock Desert in the NIFAI complex, Milton Meredith puts on his pajamas and readies himself for bed when the phone rings.

“Yes Mr. President, what’s happening?”

“I cannot sleep. I have a big decision to make.”

“Get it off your chest, Mr. President.”

“I must safeguard this Nation and the future of its Presidency.”

“Your vision is clear. Your motives are noble. So there is no guilt.”

"There is one thing. I still feel revenge deep in my heart for whoever was responsible for my debacle on 4th, July. This is dragging me down."

"Your state of mind is normal. That being said, your mind and *not* your heart should formulate the basis of your decision."

"I think I understand. I just wanted to say a few words, but I feel better now. Good night, Milton."

Milton mumbles to himself, "I wish I knew when to run for cover."

The sun was nice and bright with no clouds in the sky. A gentle breeze blows on their faces on this November morning. Rupentine and Jack Steiner walk side by side along the Colonnade. They are sharing some inner thoughts.

"Every one of these columns we go past, every step we take, is a milestone Jack, the next one better than the one before. Often, the best plans are revealed outside the Oval Office. I have made a decision."

He stops, turns around and looks Jack in the eyes.

"Europe will be spared."

Jack is stunned, "Sir, that is monumental, no pun intended."

"Jack, look at me. I am not mad but you must do *exactly* what I say *when* I say."

"Uh... but of course. Except shooting at subs that I cannot see. Let's shake on it. But first, take that call, Sir."

"Yes James - When? Accepted? Really? I can't believe my ears! Terrific! Thank you."

"Jack, that was the Chief of Staff. The next step is going to be even better."

"And?"

"Our ambassador in Moscow called McNaught. He has accepted. Volkov has accepted. Blenheim. I kept it all hush-hush."

BLENHEIM PALACE IN Oxfordshire. November 14, 2030. Russia, South Korea and the G7 members meet to discuss a Peace Accord promoted by the United States. Rupentine, Tom Hawkins, Vladimir Volkov and the South Korean President, Lee Loon are present.

IN A LONDON HOTEL, Milton and Thomas monitor the conference very closely.

Frank Rupentine shakes hands with Vladimir Volkov.

"A very strong grip, Mr. Rupentine!"

"I hope it stays firm like that. You're looking well."

"Getting a bit bald. Losing my looks."

"You still look terrific, Vladimir. Ladies?"

"I wish I had time for that. Time flies and it is not on my side – it looks as if this meeting is ready to start."

Meredith decides to use his SHIM to alert Rupentine.

Milton whispers the message, "McCain's words were, 'He sees KGB in his eyes.'"

Unintentionally, Frank stares at Vladimir's eyes.

"You look surprised, Mr. Rupentine?"

"No, I am fine. Call me Frank, it is less formal. Let's get this meeting started."

"Tom, Vladimir is taking the initiative. Shall I increase his confidence?"

"Yes, by two," says Brown.

Frank gets to the lectern and then gets straight to the point.

"This is the briefest introduction ever. Diplomatic niceties aside, we are here to

make serious and solid peace proposals, Tom?"

Tom walks to the lectern and continues, "Threats to world peace and to our civilizations are omnipresent."

They all nod approval.

"Global Trade... China is indeed a modern superpower and it is gobbling up the world. We project that in the next thirty years, its power will exceed that of the United States, Europe and Russia - combined."

Tom Hawkins looks at Volkov.

"We certainly feel uncomfortable," adds Hawkins.

"I am listening," comments Volkov.

"Frank, would you like to elaborate?"

"Russia and South Korea to join the G7. The name changes to G9. Unfreeze all sanctions on Russian banks, oligarchs and businesses. A warm feeling in Europe and Russia, I am sure."

Volkov takes down notes furiously. Rupentine sips water and appears slightly hesitant.

"Thomas, his confidence seems to be dropping. A choker must be coming up.

Can't lose him now. Increase confidence plus a bit of added aggression."

"Okay fixed. He needs to be firm with Volkov. And appease our Allies."

Rupentine, now continues to speak in a stronger voice, "Russia will roll all its forces and war materiel from the Ukraine with immediate effect."

"Without setting a precedent, Crimea will remain part of Russia."

All G7 members show surprise, then shrug their shoulders. Volkov is unmoved but relief appears on his face.

"Over the next ten years Russia will get a \$250 billion grant to revive its economy. Agreement on a new INF Treaty will be part of the deal."

Rupentine pauses and Volkov nods in a more approving manner.

"If a war or commercial conflict erupts between the U.S. and China, or North Korea, Russia *must* stay *neutral* at minimum. This is a *must, must requirement.*"

Rupentine motions to Volkov.

Vladimir Volkov walks to the lectern. "Thank you Mr. President. We also love peace. Frankly, we love China and North

Korea as much as you do. A two-pronged thorn in our backside. Take them out? Be our guests."

All nod.

He sips water.

"In Russia, it is customary to listen to what is being offered first. Then ask... I mean, politely demand, an additional ten percent. That becomes \$275 billion. I will put the offer to the DUMA... at the initial offer of \$250 billion. It will take three weeks."

"Bank on it Mr. Volkov, if all our requirements are met but we need a quicker answer."

Volkov whispers in Rupentine's ear, "Three days from today. Guaranteed."

"We will have an official announcement on the 7th December. That is a tentative date."

THE NEXT STEP in diplomacy takes place in the Presidential Palace in Ukraine. The G9, without Rupentine and Volkov meet Aleksandr Shevchenko, the Ukrainian President. As expected, Tom Hawkins takes the lead.

"Mr. President, the best offer is \$50 billion subject to the Russians pulling out

of Ukraine while Crimea *will* stay and becomes part of Russia. Peace will be achieved and a looming nuclear war will be avoided.”

“My people will never accept that. We argued this point for over an hour. It is not acceptable.”

“Aleksandr, the way you put it, it seems that your people are willing to see further destruction of their country by an enemy hundred times their size and power. Hanging in the balance, a potential for nuclear fallout with parts of the European continent destroyed in the process.”

“No, no, that’s not it, Tom...”

“... That’s exactly what it would turn out to be, guaranteed.”

“But, Tom...”

“... Everything is finite. Continued destruction of your country and Europe. You can have the first but not the second.”

“I know how my people feel!”

“Aleksandr, at this point we think we love your people more than they love themselves. We understand that. They got lost in the folly of war which clouds the thinking even of the brightest individuals.”

“Tom, I don’t have any other way. You need to understand.”

“I do indeed understand. It needs courage to lose a battle then win the war... win the peace... and save the world from destruction which is waiting right on your doorstep. Aleksandr, it needs pragmatic leadership. Now is the *only* time. It is your time.”

“I have to go back and contemplate the options.”

“Fortunately, there is no time for that. There is only one option. With a lot of pain in my heart I have to say to you, ‘Take it or leave it’. You may want to consult members of your Parliament and maybe your War Cabinet, but we need an answer in the next 24 hours – before real rockets start flying. Then it’s game over. That is final.”

The meeting dissolves.

The next morning, the G7 Heads are enjoying a game of golf at the Kiev Golf Club. The unmistakable noise of helicopter rotors. A Ukrainian Chopper appears with Shevchenko leaning out pumping his fist in the air. He jumps out of the chopper even before it had settled on the ground.

Tom Hawkins walks towards the president and greets him.

“All done. We need to head to the Palace for a Press Briefing,” says a boisterous Shevchenko.

They all drive to the Mariinskyi Palace. Obviously, this diplomatic breakthrough is noted by the Chinese who immediately show their displeasure at what they see as a provocation with the world ganging together to stall their economic progress.

The Ukrainian Parliament is somehow divided on this issue of surrendering sovereignty of Crimea to the Russians. The hardliners want to continue the fight no matter what, while the most pragmatic ones count the lives, the billions of dollars lost and the potential for much more to come.

Shevchenko’s tenure becomes even more difficult now. His ambassador to Washington, Daniil Gidinski, an accomplished multi-lingual communicator, decides to take up the challenge. It comes about after a request by Shevchenko to declare a national holiday in the Ukraine was turned down by Tom Hawkins. The holiday’s intended name would have offended the Russians. Daniil Gidinski is asked to salvage this unexpected

diplomatic tussle and save his President's standing.

AT THE PENTAGON, Ed Fingerton, the CIA Director sits with Jack Steiner.

"Ed, what is the CIA saying?"

"According to Intel, the Chinese are ramping up. Their Defense Status has been updated and some nuclear missiles are being primed."

"North Korea?"

"Troops, tanks, vehicles are heading south rapidly enough for us to take notice."

"Let me call the President," says Jack Steiner.

"Yes Jack."

"Mr. President, China is upping its defense status, priming some missiles but it is unlikely they are an immediate threat at this stage. North Korea is moving troops southwards, they are more of a headache."

"Leave DEFCON at 3. Are we ready?"

"Always, Sir. I will consult the Joint Chiefs of Staff. DEFCON 3 it is and stays so until further orders."

Rupentine's face loses color. He opens

his drawer, looks at his iPad and then he closes it just as quickly. Maybe his alter-ego Stewie could prove a bit of a handful in this fast-approaching superpower conflict.

In the Nevada Monitoring Office, Meredith's Medical Alert Watch sounds an ominous alarm. BOING, BOING. He rushes to the monitors and looks at the fast-changing data.

Milton mumbles to himself, "Confidence plus 5, aggression plus 2. Go for it, Frank."

Frank continues reading from the President's Daily Briefing. Color returns to his face but he looks increasingly concerned. He gets a call from Daniil Gidinski.

"Hello Mr. Gidinski. Give me one minute please, I have to finish reading this Briefing, it does not look good..."

Then he puts the document aside.

"... Yes..., Daniil."

"My President called Tom Hawkins to tell him about a celebration our country had in mind. They disagreed on a couple of issues..."

"... Hold on. So what are you calling me

for?”

“You may look at it differently.”

“Spell it out, Mr. Gidinski.”

“We will be declaring December 28th a National Day for Celebration. We would like to call it Freedom Day.”

“You call it what? Are you out of your ...?”

“... Are you okay Mr. President?”

“You think I sound okay? I am biting my flipping tongue right now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You do *not* – poke the bear! You will whip up nationalistic fervor and mess the whole peace process.”

“Surely Mr. President...”

“... Stop stop stop. Surely nothing. To be honest I don’t care what Tom said. This is my advice and listen to it carefully. Call your holiday what you want to call it, but do not mention occupation, freedom, retreat, V-Day, victory, Russian, regaining our territory, whatever.”

Rupentine’s rage is at an all-time high. Thomas Brown happens to walk into Milton’s office while this fiery conversation is taking place thousands of

miles away.

"Come in Tom. In time. Don't know what is happening. Jeeeesus Christ."

"It looks like it is a fight with Gidinski, the Ukrainian Ambassador. It could wreck the peace deal."

"Call Dr. Koch."

Gidinski continues, "I think I understand."

"You don't think! You do, or you don't. You watch American Movies?"

"Sir, I do."

"Your favorite actor?"

"Clint Eastwood. Sudden Impact."

"Go ahead. Make my Day! Baby you do that and you are out on your own, period. Get this in your head. The guy with the purse controls the strings. And I have the purse. And Tom has the other. And if you guys in the Ukraine screw this up you will be out on your ass quicker than a Russian missile. And that is the definition of Sudden Impact."

"I did not mean to upset you."

"Upset me? My eyes are fucking bulging. Call it a day for Peace, a New Dawn, Thanksgiving Day. I don't give two

hoots. But do not offend the Russians, do not incite anger and do not start any national fervor in your Country or in your neighboring states.”

“Got all that Mr. President.”

“Myself, did I act presidential? Hell No. Do I care? No. I just don’t have time for diplomatic niceties. The rockets could be flying any day. Some of them could even hit your heads. With that, I bid you good day.”

He slams the phone down cracking its handle. He gives himself two minutes to cool down and calls his Chief of Staff, James McNaught.

“James, get somebody to fix my phone. Now. Smashed handle. Daniil Gidinski... Call him on my behalf and tell him I apologize profusely. I lost my temper.”

Dr. Koch hurries in with a glass of water and a calmer.

“Thank you, Tim. Just a bipolar moment – north or south – either way, it was extreme!”

Chapter 15

War: Surrender Terms. World order now is inverted.

15

It is January 5th, 2031. Rupentine is in the Oval Office and calls Jack Steiner and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for an urgent meeting.

“Mrs. Neymeyer, gentlemen I would like to formalize our State of Combat Readiness. Intel tells us that the North Koreans would strike the South within a day or two.”

He pauses.

“Yesterday, the Chinese raised their Alert Status and primed some of their missiles. As of midnight tonight DEFCON 3 changes to DEFCON 2. Let your people know and be ready.”

“DEFCON 1 expected, Sir?” asks Jack.

“As soon as we detect a launch from

any side, then it's DEFCON 1. I am confident we will prevail. Our new M.D.A. weapon should take care of it all. Are we ready Jack?"

"All our targets are mapped. As soon as we go on DEFCON 1, it would be a conclusive preemptive strike with no further warnings."

"I will notify the G9. Thank you."

The Chiefs of Staff look rather surprised with the brevity and tone of the announcement.

Oval Office, January 7th, 2031. All alarms buzz in all the major military establishments. Rupentine reads Intel of a North Korean missile launch aimed at Pusan fired at 12.30 Eastern. He calls Jack Steiner.

"Jack, DEFCON 1. We're at war. Hit North Korea at 13:00 hours Eastern."

"DEFCON 1. All North Korean Assets, Sir. There are twenty drones in the sky with Feeds."

The White House Situation Room is the monitoring venue for the Administration's senior staff and the high brass from certain U.S. Agencies. Drone feed sources are cycled every 60 seconds allowing Rupentine and senior officials to watch

different scenarios witnessing the action unfold in real time.

Kunsan AFB, South Korea. F-35s and F-16s get fuelled and armed. Other F-16s are parked next to each other. The parking spots are marked 'QF-16s'. Pilots sit inside their cockpits with open canopies. They test all the controls and carry out the final flight checks assisted by ground personnel. Javelin Jim, exits the cockpit and climbs out with the aircraft's engine still at low REVS. He presses a button on a compact remote control and the canopy closes. The aircraft is pilotless. He now talks to the Drone Center in Florida.

Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida. At the Drone Center, UAV pilots sit at their monitors, eyes fixed on their respective aircraft revving on the ground in Kunsan. Pedro Hombre Gomez is a QF-16 pilot. He gets the go-ahead from Javelin Jim standing next to his pilotless plane in Kunsan AFB to take her up.

"Javelin, my QF-16 is programmed like a kamikaze plane but I will sure drop its load on Pyongyang before it's done."

With the chocks removed, he looks at his screen as he guides the QF-16 through a series of taxiways, his eyes always on

the centreline, he finally lines it up with the runway and takes her up. His fist goes up in the air as it reaches for the sky.

F-16s, F-18s, F-35 Lightnings and F-22 Raptors from the U.S. Forces in various locations in South Korea take to the air. They are soon joined in action by members of the South Korean Air Force. The B-2s carry out the heavy bombing. These are supported by the strategic B-52s. The action is quick, swift and devastating, not carried out piecemeal but in one big swoop for maximum effect. All these bombing raids are assisted by the AWACs supplying command and control, battle space management and communications and logistics.

Columns of tanks are seen smoldering inside the North Korean Border, a sorry picture of utmost devastation. The tanks that crossed into the South seemed to have been hit many times from the continuous artillery fire south of the border. The satellite imagery did capture evidence of personnel getting out of the vehicles or running for cover.

The mobile missiles are seen being hit offering a more spectacular scenario eagerly awaited by some of the power-hungry military men gazing at the

screens. The mounted missiles are able to scatter around quickly but even such rapid dispersal does not prohibit them being hit and swiftly taken out.

The Korean Radar Defense Systems are sitting targets ready for the picking offering absolutely no defense and no answer. The effect of this negates the North Korean pilots any defense against the inevitable attacks soon to be carried out by the South Korean Air Force's F-16s and Raptors.

The ICBM launching sites are being treated as priority targets since any missiles launched would offer substantial danger to the U.S. mainland and its allies. They have been at the forefront of provocations all along holding the U.S. and its allies hostages to North Korean blackmail for years. Short of the M.D.A.s, absent in this strike, THAAD and Patriot anti-missile systems were very much active to keep any rogue missiles from reaching their intended targets.

All equipment and facilities around the Nuclear Sites are by now hit but with such targets, precaution is more warranted for obvious contamination that may result should the nuclear weapons be unintentionally damaged beyond what's

safe. The heavy bombing would be carried out around the perimeters using conventional heavy weaponry from the air to ensure the infrastructure is sufficiently damaged preventing any movement of personnel or materiel into or out of the sites.

In the air, the enemy jets, most of them outdated Russian Migs, are completely outclassed by the sharper advanced U.S. jets flown by the better trained South Korean pilots.

There was some short-lived joy for the North Korean military in watching a few QF-16s being shot down after being engaged way out in the mountainous regions. This made a successful search for aircraft and pilot remains more difficult and time-consuming for a purpose.

The Drone Center commander had to remind his virtual pilots that it all looks like a very expensive video game but it had much bigger scope.

By now the escape route for the Dear Leader to China had all been wiped out. His personal jet burns on the tarmac, it is time for the Pyongyang to China railway line to take a few hits. Before long, it looks all buckled and twisted with a line of craters that follow the mangled mess.

The Russians are given the real-time feeds by the United States. This real-life tragedy is being watched by thousands who had gathered in Moscow Square and are seen greeting it with joy, disbelief, envy and worry – a perfect mix.

Rupentine stands up. He holds his stomach and looks disturbed with the emerging scenes.

“I am going back to the office,” he says in croaky voice.

He walks down the corridor at a slower pace than usual. He then leans against the wall as a female aide approaches.

“Are you feeling okay, Mr. President?”

“Just fine. War is not pleasant.”

He rushes into the first available bathroom to the nearby stall, holds his head above the toilet and vomits, then walks to the basin and splashes water on his face.

He hurries to the Executive Residence. Celine comes rushing in.

“I’m sorry Honey, war is cruel.”

“A means to an end. I must lead and I do have the strength but the people and their suffering is unbearable to watch. I am not innocent, but Jesus, those SOB

and their greed for power – I wish I could take them out directly.”

“You have done the right thing!”

“So I have reached out to Volkov. *Now*, we are friends. *Me*, being the ultimate hypocrite? Many of my people will call me rightly so. But it’s the lesser of two evils. My head is spinning. I need a rest.”

He slumps on his bed and calls Jack Steiner.

“Jack, I am having a rest. Make sure we have all available resources to rescue any Chinese off the waters when we hit them. I hate their system, not their people.”

The next day Rupentine is back in the Oval Office. He reads a continuous stream of Intel Updates when a call comes in from Jack Steiner.

“China readies for an invasion. Missiles primed at Taiwan and U.S. assets in the area. No nuclear missiles fueled. Their air cover supports amphibious vehicles carrying Chinese Marines and Infantry.”

“As soon as the first shot is fired, hit them with everything you’ve got.”

“Will do, Sir, but I will have to give you the final call.”

It is January 7th, 2031. Ten at night

Eastern Time. Jack is on a red hot call to the President.

“Sir, they are almost on the beaches of Penghu Archipelago.”

“GO. I will be in the Situation Room.”

“Carriers first priority, Sir.”

The war progress suddenly takes a more cautious and worrying turn. Taking out a Superpower is not a task that can or could be underestimated in intensity or complexity. It is a journey into the absolute unknown.

The anxiety on the faces of the military high command is similar to that displayed on the faces who had watched the Bin Laden raid. Except that the Bin Laden operation was a one-hole-target in Pakistan, immensely difficult to locate and to secure the intended objective.

By contrast, a carrier is easy to locate but the repercussions are a thousand times greater. Taking out the lives of 6,000 souls and the pride of the Chinese naval fleet in a preemptive strike guarantees an immediate response but it remains to be seen as to how swift and devastating the two opposing strikes would be. It is a problem too deep to fathom out especially when a high-tech

Superpower takes another foremost Power head-on.

In the White House Situation Room, the President, the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff and senior personnel watch intently the U.S. offensive unleashes pretty much in the same way as it did with the North Korean assault but with some deep differences.

The most important feed focuses on ships, huge number of which are seen like red flames in the blue ocean waters.

Soon the feed turns on the aircraft carriers which are regarded as a major threat to the U.S. naval assets in the area.

At this stage the President decides he does not have the stomach to witness what is about to happen. For strategic warfare reasons, he badly needs to know how the new M.D.A. Vortex weapon performs but decides not to witness it in real time.

“Stressful as it is, I want to watch the tape of the Vortex bombing on the carrier. The public is not to see it ‘live’ either.”

All the eyes in the Situation Room are peeled and glued to the monitors, heads moving from one side to the other. Different screens show a number of

supporting Chinese destroyers and other auxiliary and supply ships changing from nice shiny floating hardware to a devastated mess. There are scenes of people taking to the freezing waters but not in large numbers.

A burst of activity is witnessed few hundred yards in front of the bow of this huge floating city.

The main screen focuses on this Chinese carrier in the area. With other boats and destroyers around it taken out of action, it seems just a matter of time until it gets knocked out, but this is to be a different hit indeed.

The Vortex bomb treats its targets differently from the standard M.D.A. While the latter grills, fries and leaves its target to simmer, the Vortex is capable of sending a carrier with all those who sail in her completely unscathed to the bottom of the ocean - as fast as a brick sinks when it hits the water.

Six spots of unsettled foamy water form in the shape of an arc. They open up individually - holes in the ocean, all similar in size. The aircraft carrier slows down yet still heads in the direction of the developing crevices.

The ocean sinkholes gradually join

together to form a crevasse of huge magnitude. The carrier manages to turn slowly to its left. Three more Vortex bombs hit the water on the side of the turning direction. They join with the first six holes now merging together to form a deep abyss.

The mighty war vessel starts to slide headfirst; the bow disappears gradually. Unsecured aircraft and other equipment slide off the deck and vanish.

Now, the bow is below the waterline. Many men wait on the deck hoping for the unthinkable. They gradually lose their grip and slide cleanly off the vessel. Others get caught in the tangled mess of surface cables and equipment.

Hundreds of sailors still cling by any means possible as the U.S. rescue helicopters approach. Most of the men are sucked within the vortex that is created. And hundreds more are lifted and thrown about as they get caught on the hull at the stern-end of the carrier. Now the vessel's tail-end rises momentarily well-above the ocean surface. Its four huge propellers are clearly visible and are still spinning. Then it goes down leaving tons of debris in its wake.

U.S. rescue helicopter crews throw

lifelines to those surviving the freezing seas. They haul them on board and rush them to a nearby waiting hospital ship.

Other carriers in the area meet similar cruel fate. Cargo boats and container ships are hit and left smoldering. Many sailors with severe burns surface on the decks pleading to be rescued.

The treacherous conditions of surviving the ocean swells and freezing waters would have offered a profound challenge even to those trained and capable of enduring such harsh conditions in a more controlled and disciplined training environment. But the truth is, that most of them are not even remotely trained, prepared or equipped for this type of outcome that nobody could foresee.

The fighting pride for the mother nation had to be placed further down on the sailors' list of priorities, the highest and only priority left for them is to stay alive and hopefully see their families again.

It could have been a few Hiroshimas by now had not preemptive strike action been taken.

Cargo boats and container ships are spared the Vortex treatment but are equally incapacitated with their crews

experiencing slightly better chances of survival but with burns all over their bodies. Unfortunately, there is only so much the U.S. rescue effort could do while operating over vast areas of the oceans.

Moving from the spectacular to the mundane, this is more like a 60-hour war rather than the six hour strike effort as it was with North Korea, although that job was not quite finished as yet.

However, the same pattern follows with regards to radar sites, ground targets, air-combat and the manufacturing sites which offer the least imagination to take out. With one difference - they are incapacitated at a much faster rate because the primary weapon used at this stage of the war is the M.D.A. even though the number of targets is many times bigger.

Now that the M.D.A. has been unleashed, the attention turn to finishing the job in North Korea using this new weapon.

One huge problem however still exists and it is best described as imminent danger.

The Chinese Nuclear Submarines, all capable of launching SLBMs, are still

there lurking beneath the ocean surface but nowhere to be seen. They are not looking for their Chinese comrades but pointing their missiles at American targets in the area and on the mainland.

They wait for the orders from Beijing to launch but such orders never materialize. By now the Chinese Congress is in complete disarray. This Country has always been one for self-preservation and understands the risks of the ultimate exchange especially now with the U.S. clearly holding the upper hand.

Most of their business assets in Africa are taken out by the British. Half their cargo ships are sunk while many others are boarded as soon as they are within proximity of the U.S. and British navies. They are re-flagged and taken to a number of allies' ports... soon running out of room to berth them all, furthermore choking the local waterways.

The Russian feeds in Moscow Square and needless to say in the Kremlin, in some ways would have given a certain amount of comfort to the Soviets. They realise they must have backed the winning horse, but equally worrying should they want to become serious competitors again.

Most importantly, that the equilibrium is now re-established – from three superpowers, back to two – Russia and the U.S. – although the U.S., at this stage looks as if its world stage ranking could be appropriately described as *Primus Inter Pares*, or First Amongst Equals.

The President now returns to the Situation Room where he is properly briefed.

“Sir, all being taken out in spectacular fashion,” utters the Chairman.

Rupentine is not too amused with the way the Chairman expressed himself and gives him a dirty look.

“The Brits?”

“All over Africa.”

“Russians?”

“Sleeping peacefully.”

“Rescue at sea happened?”

“Absolutely Sir, quick and prompt.”

WHITE HOUSE SITTING ROOM, January 9th, 2031. It is eight in the morning, Eastern Time. Celine watches the TV news. Rupentine addresses the Nation.

“On January 7th at the stroke of midnight, North Korea launched an attack

on our ally, South Korea. Our U.S. forces were suddenly in harm's way. One hour after that I ordered an attack on North Korea. There was a need to act promptly. It was a *must*, to honor the bi-lateral agreement."

Celine puts her hands together, cries and prays silently.

"The attack on China was imminent. All their missiles had been primed. At ten o'clock that night, China invaded Taiwan. It was incumbent upon me to act decisively. In conjunction with the United Kingdom, I ordered a counter attack at eleven that night, one hour after the start of the Chinese invasion of Taiwan."

He pauses and turns over a new page.

"Thank God, the war is going our way."

Frank enters the room and sits by Celine. He takes her hand and gently kisses it, then looks her in the eyes.

Celine gently leans her head on his shoulder. Frank reaches for his cell phone. He dials the Chief of Staff.

"James, call Steiner. Inform others too that I will be in the Executive Residence for the rest of the day."

He looks at Celine and continues, "I

need to be by my wife's side."

He turns to Celine.

"How about a cup of coffee, Honey?"

PRESS BRIEFING ROOM. Bill Plavic and Jack Steiner stand side by side. A never-seen pandemonium and jubilation ensue.

"One more question," shouts Bill Plavic over the throng of reporters.

"Tell us more about the new weapon. Is it nuclear? How does it work?"

"It is called M.D.A, not nuclear but burns and vaporises based on a footprint, no radioactive emissions," answers Jack.

"Who developed it? What technology? Why isn't the President here?"

"Security issues."

Disapproval and shouting follow.

"What is the status of the war now and how long before it's over?"

"Maybe 3 days. The President is working on the surrender terms."

"How is the President feeling?"

"Fine."

Bill Plavic finishes off, "Thank you for your time."

MORE THAN EVER the monitors in Nevada are now keeping a closer eye on the President's behavior.

Rupentine is scribbling a bunch of notes on his pad. Celine brings him coffee and brownies.

"Brownies for you, those scribbles look messy!"

"I have missiles flying from here... to there. Like a scribble war."

He mumbles, "Arrows, crosses, green ink, red ink."

He chucks the writing pad on the desk, throws his head back, breathes out a sigh of frustration. He aggressively bites a chunk off the brownie then just as quickly shoves the rest in his mouth using the palm of his hand. He wolfs down another one even before he has a chance to swallow the previous load and almost chokes on it. He seems determined to administer some self-harm. It is a sign of distress in desperate moments even if a rainbow in the political sky is present.

He then guzzles down the coffee and finally breathes easily. He straightens himself and runs his claw-like fingers violently through his hair.

"Going to war with yourself now?"

"I need to experience some pain."

Thomas Brown comments, "He really needs some sleep. The SHIM indicates he is with Celine. So why is his anxiety increasing?"

"War is in the past, surrender terms are the fundamentals for peace and for the future."

"That explains it, Thomas. He needs a clearer mind. Aggression down, Acerbic up? Punch in the numbers."

"Less aggression, more confidence and a boost of Acerbic. Go Frank go," exclaims Thomas.

"I am not going mad, just doing what I was elected to do and feel sure that I am on the right side of history."

"Are you talking to me or are you trying to convince yourself, Frank? Should I leave the room?"

"Stay, we're on this road together." Then he gets up and walks to the window and continues, "Thank you Lord for your guidance." He looks at the heavens, maybe for a sign or for divine inspiration.

"Peace with Russia. Destruction of the planet avoided. Pollution poisoning cut by more than half. The environment will

thrive. We have given the planet a new lease of life. New laws will be enacted. And America is united again.”

He stands up, notepad in hand, looks around and sits down again. He holds his chin.

“I don’t have to wrestle with this anymore. These surrender terms are harsh, demeaning but necessary. My conscience is clear.”

The next morning is January 10th, 2031. His war cabinet assembles in the Oval Office. Rupentine walks in, no formal greetings are exchanged. In the office, the Vice President, the Attorney General, Homeland Secretary, the Secretary of State and Jack Steiner, all stand up to greet him. He acknowledges them and gets straight to work.

“Good morning. I have worked out the Terms of Surrender. There are forty-three points. I don’t intend to discuss each individually.”

He pauses and puts the draft copies on the desk. “You have one hour to go through it. I am not interested in political correctness or reading in between the lines of the Constitution. I will see you in an hour.”

Disagreements amongst the members abound. One hour later Rupentine strides in. They all stand.

“Well, verdict?”

The Attorney General says that the conditions are harsh. The discussion continues as he stays silent, resolute and carefully gazes at their faces as they debate, discuss and disagree with each other while it drags on and on.

Frank looks at his watch and then interrupts.

“I am not handing out lollies. We can argue for another twenty-four hours; Congress, another week; I need your five signatures, today. If not, one signature on the document will do. Your most important objection when I return, please.”

Rupentine walks out of the Office and returns five minutes later.

“A closing sentence. More humane...perhaps...” says the Attorney General.

“Just insert it and put your signatures on paper, thank you and let’s move on.”

CELINE GREETES FRANK with a kiss as he enters into the West Sitting Hall.

“Did they all surrender to your charm?”

“No exception. Tomorrow, on TV.”

TIMES SQUARE NEW YORK CITY. January 11th, 2031, five minutes before eight in the evening. Traffic comes to a stop. People get out of their cars. Big screens in all the major capitals show the same scene.

It is night at the NIFAI Monitoring Office. Meredith and Thomas Brown tweak Rupentine’s behavior agreeing that this is the biggest day of his life apart from declaring war.

January 11th, 2031, eight in the evening, Eastern. Eight in the morning Beijing, nine in the morning Pyongyang. Rupentine is on air from the Oval Office. With a voice intonation reminiscent of Roosevelt’s, he purposely reads slowly and clearly. He looks solemnly at the camera with every new point.

“My fellow Americans and people around the world. Welcome. The last few days, the United States went to war with North Korea and China.”

He pauses.

“I will keep this speech to the point – I am asking for an immediate surrender. Both governments have in their possession the complete documents with

all the surrender requirements ...”

He pauses.

“A swift surrender is to be received at the Oval Office two hours and five minutes after this speech ends ...”

There is a long pause.

“These terms seem strict and harsh, but will be even stricter should they not be accepted by the requested time.”

He pauses again.

“The consequences of non-compliance with these demands vary but they are all clearly spelled out ...”

A long long pause while he fixes his eyes even more intensely on the camera.

“One final warning to North Korea and China... Do *not* attempt to launch.”

“The details of the Surrender Terms will be made public following their acceptance.”

He pauses.

“We regret all loss of life and look forward to unite together to form a brighter and prosperous future. A future that would bring benefits to all. May God bless America and all the people of the world.”

He pauses.

A war communiqué will be issued by the White House for the Print Media.

“The time in Washington is now fifteen minutes past eight in the evening, Eastern. Thank you.”

Jack Steiner and Ed Fingerton join the President in the Oval Office. Frank sits behind his desk in a pensive mood. Ed stands looking at three machines, hooked together specifically to work in tandem, two of them constantly spitting out Intelligence. The third machine is silent with the green light on.

“Well, it’s past my bedtime, nine-thirty, I wonder why the third machine is not ticking,” says Rupentine.

Ed Fingerton is visibly anxious and sweating a little. To ease the tension, he performs simple calisthenics, prompting even more anxiety at the Resolute Desk.

Jack Steiner breaks the silence, “Have faith Sir, it’s nine-fifty, any time now, I hope.”

The two machines suddenly go silent... but, with a loud beep. Ed freezes.

Then, in unison, all the equipment comes to life, and the most awaited news of the night is simultaneously spitted out.

Rupentine and Jack jump out of their seats and rush next to Ed's side, eyes wide open on the Intel. It's the Chinese Surrender followed by the North Korean. There are fist bumps all around with controlled laughs of satisfaction.

Rupentine walks to his desk, composes himself, kisses it, sits down and breathes a sigh of relief.

REPROGRAMMING THE PRESIDENT

SURRENDER DEMANDS.

We require that the powers of China and those of North Korea to surrender immediately.
During this time there will be cessation of offensive activities observed by all sides.
An initial response will be required 2 hours after this surrender demand is aired. Your acceptance would be required to reach the U.S. Government directly.
Then the acceptance of surrender will be announced publicly by yourselves and to the world.
Maximum Clarity requires that all points will be separately mentioned and agreed to in your acceptance.
If response is not received the U.S. will launch limited offensive of various facilities until acceptance is formally received.
Your announcement to the world will follow a few hours after your acceptance.
The Surrender Document will be signed on the aircraft carrier USS Reagan at a time to be agreed.
The North Korean Surrender Document will be signed in the neutral truce village of Panmunjom in the DMZ.
Upon signing we will stop our attacks on your nations as long as the agreement is being honored.
China and North Korea to abandon future nuclear armaments.
China to give a safe passage to all those in possession of American and UK passports who want to return home.
They will be flown out with your national carrier which will then be guaranteed a safe return. For North Korean a different form of transportation will be agreed.
Consequences of Rejection.
If the Surrender Demand is rejected, anything that moves and appears aggressive will be shot down.
Your industrial centers will be severely degraded if not completely destroyed.
Any aircraft flying out of Chinese airspace civilian or military will be considered hostile and will be taken out.
DECOMMISSIONING.
All Military Satellites used by China and North Korea will have to be taken out of Service and rendered safe from collision with any other spacecraft. The U.S. will demand to know in advance how this would be carried out and it would have to be verified.
All Nuclear facilities and locations in existence or under construction and all nuclear war heads are to be notified to the U.S.
A program will be put forward and a date agreed by both nations to start on decommissioning all of the above.

TAIWAN.

There will be a complete retreat from Taiwan.
Renunciation of all future aggressive ambitions for Taiwan.
Compensate Taiwan for the invasion on a sum yet to be agreed by the U.S.

BELT & ROAD.

We consider the Belt and Road Initiative a further subversive Instrument in quest for world economic domination. This leads to the situation we were in prior to the conflict of the last few days.
Therefore, the U.S. demands that the Belt and Road will be abandoned.

Charles V Abela

All countries will have the loans extended to them written off and forgiven.

No further compensation will be required from the host countries.

None of the facilities currently in place would be damaged or degraded in any way

REPROGRAMMING THE PRESIDENT

SUBMARINE MANAGEMENT.

China and North Korea to call off any intended submarine launch activities immediately.

I underline the word 'Immediately'.

Any launch of any nuclear missiles will meet with a devastating response from the U.S. land-based or submarine-based equivalents on the mainland.

All submarines nuclear-armed or otherwise need to be notified of their current whereabouts in the oceans to the U.S. Naval Command.

All submarines to be called to base immediately.

The vessels will be escorted to their natural base by U.S. Submarines. Upon docking, all their nuclear missiles and warheads will be handed over to the U.S. command in the area. The missiles and their warheads will be neutralized and disposed of with Chinese and North Korean representatives present to confirm that such action had taken place. This however will be done in a safe manner over the days following the impounding of such weapons.

The submarines are not to leave port unless they have their nuclear capability devices decommissioned. And then verified and cleared to sail by the U.S. We will await Chinese recommendations how they will go about doing this.

In the meantime, the submarines will stay at port until conditions acceptable to the U.S. are deemed viable for their patrols to restart.

Internal Affairs and Subversive Activities

The U.S. has no intention to interfere in North Korean or Chinese internal affairs. However, any subversive activities in proxy countries or foreign countries will be considered as an act of war. Appropriate measures will be taken if and when this is identified. The main consequence will be on the mainland of the North Korean or Chinese Industrial Complexes or both if acting together.

We call upon the Governments of North Korea and China to accept these unconditional surrender terms by all members of their Governments, parties and members of their armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in doing so.

END OF SURRENDER DEMANDS

THAT DAY'S TABLOIDS carry only one headline, consisting of just one word: 'SURRENDER.'

One tabloid wisely notes that 'some of the prayed-for blessing hopefully would find its way to cut down the murders, shootings and suicides that account for twice the number of souls lost on the three U.S. vessels. This tragedy happens on a daily basis. But no praise and admiration should be taken away from those who were there for us until they met with their unfortunate deaths.'

Victory, Surrender, Annihilation and similar words and thoughts race through the President's mind.

The NIFAI monitor needles are moving in one direction only. Upwards and colored red. Irrespective of adjustments it seems his thinking is uncontrollable. Dr. Koch is told by Milton Meredith to give Frank tranquilizers and get him under control. Apparently, Frank had already been told twice that day to calm himself down.

In the meantime, Iran keeps its cool while Israel watches across the border in Lebanon for any trouble from Iran's surrogates and proxies.

The action starts to slow down but Israel thinks it is too much to let an opportunity like this slip away without extracting something useful out of the Islamic Republic. Hitting Iran's coveted nuclear facilities had been their objective for a very long time.

Some members of the Israeli hawkish government are itching to go. But with their hands seemingly tied with no clear motive, they decide to stir up the pot themselves. Israeli Black Ops are sent across the border acting as saboteurs. Their actions generate skirmishes that would make world news buzz again.

They seize this opportunity to launch a preemptive strike. The U.S. is made aware of this. The President, in his race to ensure national security but equally glory and world acclaim, turns a blind eye to it. The attack includes heavy damage to the Iranian nuclear sites effectively destroying their launching capabilities. The confrontation takes out their offensive missiles as soon as they are used in retaliation and start flying towards Israel. Seven such missiles however did find their target and hit Israel with loss of life.

The UN Security Council, is in absolute disarray as it had been since hostilities

started a few days ago. As per usual, talks go 24/7, papers fly endlessly all over the place and more to the point, equally pointless.

It brings back memories of the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush when he remarked about the United Nations in a speech to the Community in Trenton, New Jersey on September 23, 2002.

"Either you can become the League of Nations, either you can become an organization which is nothing but a debating society, or you can be an organization which is robust enough and strong enough to help keep the peace. Your choice."

The talks go on and on. Eventually the supporting documents are filed and stamped as 'Unfinished Business - Debate Only' and filed away to be tackled on another day, maybe.

Chapter 16

*Rupentine - Increased sense of isolation.
Reverse Engineering.*

16

A few weeks after the war ended, Rupentine starts to feel increasingly isolated. He takes to the golf course at the Potomac Golf Club, all by himself doing some putting when his Chief of Staff calls.

“The King of Sukopia came off his horse in Austria suffering head injuries. The Chinese are not involved and by the way, their Embassy skeleton staff is now down to two.”

Rupentine sends a text message to Dr. Koch.

Tim, the king of Sukopia suffered head injuries in Austria. Set up a clinic in Sukopia exactly like ours in Nevada. Fly there and make sure it's functional. You may have to operate. Jack will call you.

Herman and Jeremiah are in Kraut's

New York office discussing Rupentine.

"JJ, we are on target with Nicola's wishes, the war is won and it is behind us and the president is untouchable - And I need to draw \$100 million from the Swiss Bank Account."

"Checkmate. You need to ask our King." was Jeremiah's prompt answer.

"That's not much help, JJ," retorts Herman.

JJ ignores the remark and continues. "We need to discuss Frank's future. I will call Thomas now... Hold on, no answer. I'll leave a message."

It's JJ here, Thomas. We need to meet to talk about Frank's future. NYC tomorrow? One o'clock, lunch at Gino's. See you then.

Herman, Jeremiah, Milton and Thomas Brown get together at Gino's enjoying and celebrating the Nation's victory, the courage shown by the President and Nicola di Fermi whose vision got them to this point.

"Let's raise a toast in respect. To Nicola and the President. It's been a great success, meaning the A.I. Chip has to go before the second term is out," says Herman.

"Take it out when, where, how?" asks Thomas.

"A devious smile on your face, what have you got, Milton?" asks Herman.

"Tim Koch treated the King in the new Sukopia clinic. After recovering, his Excellency thanked Frank and invited him over to visit. Believe it or not, Frank accepted to go and see this part of the world full of malaria and insect bites. The finer details will have to be worked out."

"All in your hands, Milton. You lead him to Sukopia, we'll have him fixed," quips Thomas Brown.

"NIFAI is doing well now. Management will stay unchanged. Defense contracts for the A.I. Chips propel it forward," adds Herman.

JJ stands up, leans forward with his hands on Herman's shoulders and whispers, "Just a reminder, boys, when did you last have a fat rise? I'm off. Herman, you're picking up the bill?"

JJ walks towards the door. Many of the patrons' eyes follow his tall frame edging towards the exit, then he stops, turns and walks back to the table and leans over their heads.

"Surprised? I forgot to tell you." He

whispers, “if this covert jungle operation crumbles, make sure the ‘*gate*’ at the end of Sukopia, stays robust enough. By the way Milton, your middle name is not Milhous, is it?”

A loud burst of laughter follows and it attracts attention from most.

AT THE WHITE HOUSE Press Briefing Room, Bill Plavic stands behind the lectern confronted by reporters.

“Thank you. A medical bulletin on the President. Yesterday evening, the second day on his short visit to Sukopia, the President fell sick and he is being treated by his physician Dr. Koch who suspects it is a Tsetse fly bite.”

“How long?”

“Back in Oval Office in five days.”

“Who is in charge in the White House?”

“The VP, John Massey.”

On this same day at this same time, Meredith is with Rupentine having an unusually uncomfortable conversation. It is two in the afternoon in the Sukopia Clinic.

“Something’s bothering me, Milton. Tim Koch told me I was lucky that all the NIFAI Medical Staff were in Sukopia, a

stitch in time... saves one."

"Uh... Excellent sense of humor, Sir."

"Milton, do you really expect me to believe that? Exactly, what happened? I don't remember riding horses or elephants."

"No Sir, you didn't. I don't know - ."

"- I followed your advice to keep the insects away. I did wear long sleeves, no bright colors and did not wander around in the jungle."

Milton is now looking really distraught.
"The Lord works in mysterious ways."

"Now becoming an Evangelical?"

"I am truly ashamed, Sir."

"Come here, Milton. Sit next to me."

Back at the Press Briefing Room in Washington, the reporters keep on pounding Bill Plavic.

"Is he up on his feet?"

"He could be resting."

In the recovery room in Sukopia, Rupentine puts his arm around Milton's shoulder who is now sitting next to him.

"I know you have my best in your heart. Just tell me, I'll be okay."

"It's your Legacy, Sir. We couldn't let the Press get a whiff of this. You would be losing certain medical privacy soon. Walter Reed maybe?"

Then a sigh of relief from Milton, and he continues.

"A new scandal. All the work that you have done, all you have achieved could go just like that. It all becomes a thing of the past."

"Milton, you said enough. Don't torture yourself. You helped me all the way to become President. You have been the strongest link in a robust chain."

Milton tears up.

"Thank you. Excuse my crying. We don't want you to be remembered as a Robotic President. Believe me Sir, you are much bigger than that."

"You have done everything right. Your actions can only be praised and there is nothing to be forgiven. Let me rest now."

Still at the Press Briefing Room, Bill Plavic is facing a sceptical horde of reporters. "Reports in the media point out to subversive Chinese hit squads active in Europe and in the U.S. Could there be a linkage?"

“Our intel does not show any of that. Absolutely no linkage. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you, that’s it for the day.”

Chapter 17

The real Rupentine – Spilling the beans.

17

Rupentine now fully fit, practices his swing in rapid succession like a pro. Herman and Jeremiah watch in admiration. It is past eleven. Two choppers appear in the distance. They both land on the fairway at the Columbia Country Club in Maryland.

The first helicopter is another 'White Top' from the Presidential fleet. It earns its nickname from the white livery of its top half. Jack Steiner, Milton Meredith and Thomas Brown emerge from the helicopter and make their way towards the President. Six marines jump out of the second chopper. They carry a catering table, food and light drinks. Within five minutes, Rupentine has five guests seated around him, they all raise wine glasses in honor.

“Gentlemen, we all know each other well. My administration is coming to an end. You are my trusted inner group but there may be some gaps in your knowledge about me, maybe some missing links. Jack, I owe you a lot.”

“Likewise, the gentlemen on my right. They founded NIFAI, Nevada Institute for Artificial Intelligence. We may still have some big decisions to make.”

“On my left, the NIFAI Executioners. They supply Artificial Intelligence Chips to the Military.”

“Jeremiah, you take over.”

“NIFAI was conceived by Nicola di Fermi. We put in \$300 million to kick it off. The objective of NIFAI is to help identify the candidate for the Presidency and then formulate a strategy to elect that person to the Oval Office. The other purpose is to keep a constant eye on the American political agenda especially if it starts going off the rails.”

Jack swirls the wine, sips some and swishes some more in his mouth. Jeremiah looks rather amused as the President interrupts.

“Enjoying the wine Jack, more?” asks Frank.

“Yeah, more from Jeremiah.”

“As we all know, Nicola di Fermi was a man of great intellect and wisdom. He strongly believed that the American Democracy lost its way ending up with a polarized Nation, a Nation of haves and have nots, abused by greedy politicians fueled by a multitude of influencers, bloggers and fanatical groups, driven by social media applications.”

“The sole purpose of many of our fat cats is to feed their own egos and top up their bottomless pockets. Simply put, it’s nothing like what our founders and forefathers had in mind. Nicola believed in continuous change for the betterment of our lives, in effect the opposite has happened. We ceased to lead the world. We are a country that soon was to be dominated by China, now I am happy to say, that is a thing of the past.” He looks thankfully at the President.

“Nicola came up with a solution to get back and claim our rightful place in the world. The only solution that he could see was to give our democratic processes a thoroughly good shake and re-align its stars, so to speak. His strong belief was ‘The End justifies the Means.’”

“Our motto is SUMUS OMNES PARES.

We are all equal. We stuck to our commitment. Our role is coming to an end. We never had any say in military operations, indeed we never profited from our involvement. And yes, we are proud of being the catalysts for this movement.”

“We all love our Country and therefore it needs no reminder that this divulging of information stays amongst us six. Thank you.”

“Will you be running for president, Jeremiah?” asks Jack Steiner.

“My bald head will make that difficult!” answers Jeremiah with a cheeky grin.

All give a polite smile, including Rupentine.

Then Jack Steiner picks up the baton, “Making peace with Russia was a presidential masterstroke, it was the best-kept war secret. The rest is old news, one trillion dollars.”

Frank comes in, “Cheap. Regret any deaths of course, especially those of our fallen. Could have been 1000 Hiroshimas. Let’s go and sink some easy balls.”

They follow the President to the putting green.

“Milton, you have treated me well since

before my first campaign. Thank you for your help.”

Frank Rupentine raises his right hand, palm open.

“Gentlemen, I want to be honest with you... At that precise moment of maximum anger on the 4th of July, I delivered a forceful speech. It was a manic episode maybe a result of an ever-present bipolar disorder. It was forceful, aggressive, clear-cut and...”

He pauses and a blank look appears on his face.

Then in a subdued voice, “... I enjoyed it then, but after that, it depressed me. Something really bad at the core of my mind and soul.”

Frank putts and misses, but smiles and continues.

“We are increasingly dependent on new technology. Trinitas is a great three-headed monster. My question to you, Thomas, - can we get a number-cruncher that makes decision-making easier, smarter and more effective for the president - like ...?”

“... never miss a putt,” says Jeremiah.

“Now you’re on to something JJ,”

replies the President. "So what's the answer, Thomas."

Thomas immerses himself in thought. All others look at him intently and wait.

"Don't worry, Thomas. Only six of us here. All free from possible bugs, spy cameras, NSA boys listening to every word I say." Then he pauses.

"God, those NSA guys are omnipresent, can't even break wind silently. If it's silent they sniff it, if loud, as much as a hiss, they hear it. I feel I got a probe stuck up my ass."

"Sir, you are asking for a machine that learns how to think and act like a human being - a Master. Humans are masters, Trinitas is a slave."

"Uh... that word. No violation of the Constitution?"

"Absolutely none. This supercomputer is referred to as 'Big Daddy' - The Master."

"Can we get this Big Daddy? How much? When?"

"Not on the Amazon shelves. One year maybe. IBM at Oak Ridge Laboratory - the price tag was \$325 million. Then it has to learn how to think and act like a

human to adapt without following explicit instructions. How does it learn this? By using algorithms and statistical models, hence the term 'Machine Learning'. It becomes human in its thinking and finally, it becomes a Master. But one word of caution - it will never become a Tiger Woods."

"That disappoints me, but we can't always have everything. I want it to capture all intel from the CIA, FBI, NSA, all enemy intel - worldwide 24/7. Feasible? Downside?"

"Twelve to eighteen months. Security and a new department to run it. Two of the Trinitas computers will help with the Machine-Learning-part of its education."

"Thomas, no more chips?"

"That's in the past, Sir." Then Thomas reaches in his pocket.

"This is the A.I. ArmBand. It is non-intrusive. Here, wear it on your arm and take it off at will. It would have sunk that ball for you."

"That looks interesting."

Frank stops and reflects for a few seconds.

"Sinking those carriers is what's still

very much on my mind. Can we have ten seconds of silence in honor of the fallen?"

"Big Daddy decision. My faith is my strength. I will pray and you will get an answer, that much I promise you. It would affect how the presidency is run. Thank you for all your help and have a safe trip home."

IT IS NIGHT time and Celine and Frank relax in the West Sitting Room. Frank stares at the ceiling with a book about Palestine on his lap.

He looks at Celine over his specs. "A big decision needs to be made and then one more mission, darling."

"What are you on about?"

"Early bed, Honey. Kiss Goodnight."

He walks to his bedroom. He changes into his pajamas and walks to the window and gazes at the starlit sky.

He kneels by the bedside and turns the recorder on.

And prays, "Lord I am looking for help."

He speaks aloud at first, then his voice gets gradually lower, more searching and pleading for inspiration, "Lord forgive me for I have sinned. Many times..."

He climbs into bed and barely moves his lips, finishes his prayer, then closes his eyes and drops off to sleep.

The next morning, Frank walks in with a spring in his step for his breakfast and hands the transcription tape to Celine.

"Celine, would you transcribe this please?"

"Playing secretary again. What's this?"

"For posterity. It's history, darling. When do you think I can get the transcript?"

"Let's see, Hair, Nails, Manicure. Would next week be okay?"

"You're a darling. Not only efficient but also very effective. Wish me a good day at the Office."

He then gives her a gentle kiss on the forehead.

Frank often tends to ignore what Celine is saying to him, not out of disrespect but because his mind tends to wander off on challenging tasks that face the Nation or at times, one suspects, from the effects of his bipolar condition.

In particular, if the afterthoughts expressed by Celine are considered trivial at the time of utterance.

Today it is one of those days when he just wants to prove to himself that he is a shrewd negotiator.

He knows he is cheating in overestimating his capabilities. He feels he must add something into the mix of his negotiating skills that will give a boost to both his ego and self-esteem. He realises that it is a quality which is not God-given as a gift, not even to presidents.

He wants to sharpen his skills in anticipation of the tough negotiations awaiting him, if he were to undertake the Middle East mission. He intends for this to happen notwithstanding the opposition from Celine for such a seemingly impossible venture.

But he is also cognizant of the two distinct power advantages he had over most accomplished negotiators – the power of the Presidency and the persuasive negotiating powers enabled through the NIFAI ArmBand.

Chapter 18

Machine Learning Computer. The Master, not the Slave.

18

Rupentine makes his first call of the day from the Oval Office – a conference call with the founders.

“Herman, JJ, good morning, I have decided to go ahead with the Machine Learning project. Two of the three computers will be decommissioned from Trinitas to kick off the required Machine Learning Process.”

Then he continues. “I will need the NIFAI boys in my office for advice. I understand and respect your decision to pull out, but out of courtesy, I am asking you if you would like to attend the meeting.”

Jeremiah answers promptly showing all the respect due, “We politely prefer not to attend, Sir. The NIFAI boys have this

thing in hand and are more than capable in that area than any of us. Thomas Brown is an excellent business negotiator. Please note Mr. President, you have our full support on this decision and any other. We really wish you well with this new initiative.”

“Thanks JJ, we will see each other at golf. Thank you for all the support you and Herman have given me. Bye for now.”

Frank then calls Meredith, Brown, Steiner and the President’s Chief Financial Officer for a meeting scheduled for the next day.

At the meeting, Thomas Brown and Milton Meredith take the lead. They say they will be in contact with Institutes and Universities to hire expert scientific staff, and explain the importance of the confidentiality that they had in mind. They would also talk to the high command at IBM to get some initial specs and cost. After that, they suggest that the President himself will conduct the final negotiations for the purchase of Big Daddy.

Two days later, Meredith and Brown fly to the IBM Headquarters in Armonk, New York. They are ushered to the boardroom and Thomas turns to Milton, “We are businessmen today, not scientists, not

professors or technical gurus. We have to be arrogant without being arrogant, if you know what I mean.”

Milton says “I will have to follow your lead, you’re much better than me with the big dollars. Have no fear, my mouth will be zipped.”

Thomas says “I think I am going to love this game of high stakes.”

Five company executives walk into the boardroom and all take their seat around the polished wooden table. After introducing themselves they start the mandatory small talk.

Thomas Brown eyed all the five and in the most polite manner possible he delivers the first major blow.

“Who exactly will be making the decision on Scope, Equipment, Availability and Money? As you know, we have National Security issues. Serious ones.”

Maximillian Hungerford, the chief honcho of the company looks at the three executives to his left, who promptly get up, shake hands and walk out. In one swipe Hungerford loses three-fifths of his army.

“It’s me and Brad Higgins, Chief Financial Officer,” says Hungerford. “Mr.

Brown, we do appreciate we are on an even keel with regards to negotiating heads present at this meeting, needless to say we more than understand you have the firepower, but please do not make a massacre out of this.”

Milton Meredith could see Thomas Brown’s strategy at play. He decided to really honor his promise of 5 minutes ago to keep his mouth zipped up, in case he messes up.

Thomas Brown explains the need for the type of Supercomputer most adaptable for Machine Learning and asks for a ballpark figure.

Hungerford is reluctant to come up with an answer except he quotes the Oak Ridge Laboratory computer complex as a comparison. “That was \$325 million. In today’s money, it’s more like \$400.”

Thomas Brown says “Stop, Stop, Stop” moving his head from side to side in disapproval.

Hungerford then continues, “You cannot get the Chinese one, they’re still smoking amongst the war ruins, you cannot get the Russian one, they are too problematic, in addition the Russians are too awkward to do business with and difficult to understand. That leaves the

Japanese. Cheaper yes, maybe a few petaFLOPS faster yes, but do you really care for that?"

"Not at all. A few petaFLOPS less... that does not worry me. The price does. The Japanese will kill themselves to have their Supercomputers driving White House decisions. Your move next, Max. What is your second ballpark?"

Hungerford reflects for a moment, "Depends what you're after, I mean, do you want one that moves, walks, dances or one that would fly. That would be about \$450 million."

"No, one that sits on the floor but learns as fast as the one in Oak Ridge, maybe a little faster and it needs to fly," says Brown.

"At \$325 million in today's money you have a bargain," retorts Hungerford.

Brown continues "Let's say time stood still."

"Well okay, take \$75 mil off for inflation as you succinctly put it, and we will be talking business."

Brown looks at Meredith with the slightest of smiles indicating a deal is in the works.

Based on the body and facial language he had just observed, Hungerford springs back, "So we are talking business?"

"I won't be, but the President will. Can you arrange to meet him in the Oval Office two weeks from now?"

As if on cue, both Max and Brad raised their eyebrows and gave a surprising look. The weight of negotiating in the Oval Office meant another 30% off the price tag. It will be cut down further on top of the \$75 million.

"Mr. Brown, we already knocked \$75 million off."

Meredith finally unzips and joins in, "Hey gentlemen, we are talking about a big calculator here. Frank Rupentine is a nice guy. The one who will replace him is a tougher cookie and most certainly he would want to improve and beat any offer that comes from his predecessor, you know the old competitive spirit ... what you can do, I can do better."

"Okay, what can we say gentlemen except we wish you a good day and pass our regards to the President. Tell his Chief of Staff to give us a date."

"Will do," replies Thomas Brown.

Once on their own. “Well done, Thomas. Wow. I can’t even get 5% at Walmart’s.”

Thomas Brown ponders, “So I would say the President should pay no more than \$220 million.”

IT IS THE highest profile business appointment ever for Max Hungerford. The day of reckoning has arrived as he joins Thomas Brown and Rupentine. They assemble in the Oval Office to discuss the possible purchase of Big Daddy Supercomputer.

“Max, I have only ten minutes. But it could be worth your while. Fire!”

“... \$250 million, Mr. President.”

“That’s a universe too far.”

He looks at Thomas and asks, “Our options? Realistic?”

“Japanese. Not with the ‘Made in America.’ label.”

“Max, how does your spaceship compare?”

“Fewer petaFLOPS.”

“PetaFLOPS? Crypto Currency? Legal?” jokes Rupentine.

“It’s computer speed terminology, Sir. A little slower, but of no consequence but

a few more dollars,” says Thomas Brown.

With a piercing look in his eyes Rupentine adds, “Max, speed I don’t understand, dollars, I do. So, what are the numbers?”

“Made in the U.S.A. \$250. Japan \$230,” answers Hungerford.

“Millions eh.” And looks at his watch.

“I am running late as usual. Do we have to finish this today?” asks Rupentine.

“Not really, Sir,” replies Thomas Brown.

“Max, let me think clearly...”

Frank notices Max sweating. That’s exactly how he wants him.

“... Watch my hand,” says Rupentine.

Max waits, sweats, eyes fixed on the President’s hand. Rupentine purposely ponders. Max looks even more nervous and a little restless in his chair. Rupentine shows all the signs of a shrewd operator. He knows he’s got him in a vice. He wears a grin. He purposely deliberates. Then he finger-gestures the intended number. Two. Two. Zero. Max’s face turns white and clears his throat.

“Mr. President. \$220 million?”

Rupentine just nods. Once. No verbal answer was forthcoming. The power of silence speaks volumes. Max holds his head.

"Uh... Sir... Done. And..."

"... The order? Will be on your desk soon. Max, you know - Appropriation Committees and Congress tend to take a little time. Please start putting the computer together."

"But Sir, the new..."

"... President? He will take over January 20th. I am in charge till then and I have many ways of skinning a cat. Excuse political correctness."

"I understand, Sir. Thank you."

"Good one, Max. Let's shake on that. Forgive me for putting you through the mincer. You're a nice man and I truly mean that; I really wish you well and I wanted you to walk out of here with a fat order. And you got it! Not exactly an obese order, but a good one nevertheless... take care."

They stand and shake hands again. But Max looks somewhat surprised. He wonders about how to proceed from now till the time the official order with full Congressional Approval ends up on his

desk. What preparatory work could he do in the meantime.

Frank looks at Hungerford. "Max, I know what you're thinking. You will have the Heads of Agreement Document tomorrow and then the order. Do not delay. Get cracking and go to work."

"But with all respect, Sir, the new President?"

Hungerford stands silent for a moment.

His last word is 'Sir'. Then he smiles and departs.

WHITE HOUSE WEST WING. Rupentine walks in and kisses Celine.

"History in an envelope with the Presidential Seal. Your transcript. You will give this to the President upon my passing, whenever it happens."

"You are much different from the man I knew ten years ago. Better, kinder, even loving - at times."

"Nice words, Celine, I love you."

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT is very much evident in all stores and shop windows in Pennsylvania Avenue. A presidential motorcade arrives at the White House. Walter Ferraro is 59, 6 feet tall, ex-businessman. He is impeccably dressed

and is accompanied by the new First Lady, Lydia. They are met by Rupentine and Celine as they step out of the car. They greet each other as they make their way down the hall to the Oval Office.

"Here we meet for the first time. Welcome to your new home."

"Lydia, let's tour the House."

"I'd love that. Let's go."

Frank reaches out for an unsealed envelope with a letter inside, "Take a look at this letter, Walter."

Walter reads the letter slowly as if examining every single word. "This is unbelievable, Frank. Nicola di Fermi huh. Greatest thinker of our times."

Frank stands up and takes his jacket off. He rolls up his sleeve and proudly points at an electronic gadget wrapped around his arm.

"New gadget - A.I. ArmBand - It is the latest product of NIFAI. It almost guarantees you a second-term."

"Tell me more, you hit the right spot."

"Using the ArmBand, it helped me negotiate peace with Russia and strengthened my resolve to take on China. America reigns supreme again."

“At the core, a supercomputer system?”

“Trinitas drives it. A new Supercomputer will soon be added. It handles all our own and all our Friends’ and Allies’ Intel. 24/7, and of course most of our enemies’ intel too.”

“The Nation believes your mission was accomplished with the highest marks.”

“Middle East Peace! I was frightened of success. It’s my Legacy. And your Legacy. I am sure we can put our stamp on it... Walter, you say...?”

“You are an accomplished diplomat now. You need a rest, Frank. Enjoy life without further stress. History will remember you at the top.”

“I need this last mission.”

“It would kill you. The strain of it all or a bullet could. Why do you need this?”

“I set myself that goal ten years ago ... while recovering in hospital. I know I can do this but I need the official stamp on it. I cannot do it without your blessing.”

“Let me think about it.”

The day’s business comes to an end and they all walk out to the Porch.

“Walter, Lydia, it’s been a pleasure.”

It's late evening and Frank scribbles furiously while Celine looks on.

"One more decision to be made."

"The Middle East? That mission will kill you. Religious fanatics."

ROY STENNINGS IS the Governor of Nevada. He is in his early sixties, burly, mustachioed, his hat always firmly planted on his head, his cowboy boots rest on his wide desk as he sits in his usual relaxed posture. He calls Rupentine, an old political foe and now a friend.

"Yes, Roy," answers Rupentine.

"The Cenotaphs are ready, Frank. By the way, while I am talking to you, I am staring at the wall looking at some pictures and old posters."

"Marilyn Monroe? What pictures, what posters?"

"No, Doris Day and Doc Holliday?"

"You've always been a cowboy and a gambler, what about Doc Holliday?"

"It's his Wanted Poster from years back. It's hanging on my wall. Happy to pay 'DEAD OR ALIVE'. Just send us the bill, Frank. Ha ha ha."

"You haven't changed Roy, but have

they changed any of the words on the Memorial Stone? They need to be inscribed exactly as I wrote them.”

“Exactly as you wrote them, Mr. President. That was the Executive Order. It includes, ‘LEST WE FORGET.’ Where did you get those words from anyway?”

“You’re showing your ignorance again, Roy. They are used on Australian Cenotaphs. The first part of the world I cleaned, before I did your patch. Are you educating yourself with a bit of reading of late?”

“Yeah, the usual old stuff. For the fourth time I am on that story ‘How the West was Won.’ One of your favorites.”

“You should catch up with the times, Roy, and read the latest ‘How the World was Won.’ Only happened a few days ago. Nobody told you about this as yet?”

“Ha ha ha, you son of a gun, you still have that old sense of humor,” says Stennings.

Rupentine returns the compliment, “You’re a true friend and thank you man, God Bless, Goodbye.”

Tucked away in the Executive Residence, Frank mumbles to himself while working on his memoirs, cenotaphs,

library and the rest.

“Fair dinkum Aussie words. Never lose respect for a Country that you love.”

“What are you mumbling on about darling?”

“Nothing. Just busy on my memoirs.”

“Snappy! Don’t get feisty, Honey.”

“Not feisty, just pumped up.”

He quietens down again.

“Being too frank, too open, too transparent tends to upset sensitive people even if they agree.”

“Which chapter are you on now?”

“It’s called The Rape of Europe.”

“What was that again,” asks Celine.

“The Rape of Europe. It is a critical chapter of my world views, albeit in retrospect. It is exactly what I feel inside, the facts as I described them and the actions and political decisions taken. And of course, the subsequent consequences mostly responsible of how and why we got in all this mess.”

“I am still listening.”

“It’s all in the Memoirs, hopefully, it will not offend more than a few...

millions.”

“Obviously, Meredith has not fixed that condition in your head but you did extremely well in spite of.”

“Kissy Kissy on the cheek – here.”

“Lover boy. Huh.”

The tweaking of his behavior has been somewhat relaxed knowing that he is coming to the end of his term.

His mind seems to be focused on his imaginary third term – albeit he will be out of office, he would still be in the limelight if not hogging it for most of the time.

Chapter 19

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

19

Frank's mind is certainly not on his cereal, prunes or blueberries. He takes a call, smiles, puts the phone down and now he relishes and devours his breakfast. It was indeed a short call but long on objective.

"Sunday morning. It must be important, Honey."

"The mission is set for June 2033. My A.I. ArmBand is fine to keep. And we have a majority of two in the Senate so the Funds for Big Daddy should be okay. That's three out of three, Celine."

"Lord. This is a third term, Frank."

"The most-achieving President ever. What else do you want?"

"*You*. This mission will kill you."

“Okay, I heard you. My ArmBand is on and I’m off to the Potomac Golf Club.”

After 5 minutes on the golf course, he calls Celine and informs her that he is on Marine One on his way back to the White House.

“Special pasta smells good.”

“Why so early. Are you okay?”

“I only get one shot at this.”

At dinner, Frank sips wine while he continues with some trivial talk but his mind is on Palestine.

“I hope you like your favorite pasta.”

“Look into my eyes, Celine. I will get a Middle East Peace Agreement. *Bet* on it. Yes, I am a creative guru.”

“Why didn’t you become one?”

“Smartass advertising pricks indulging in self-love. I couldn’t do that and be loved by the people I represent.”

“Language unbecoming of a President, even though tomorrow is your last big day.”

FRANK AND CELINE walk slowly hand-in-hand towards Marine One, parked on the South Lawn. They climb the airstair, stop at the top, turn around and wave a long

good-bye to the adoring crowd who continuously applaud. Celine has tears rolling down her cheeks but still manages to show her gratitude.

Herman Kraut is amongst the guests. He wears a grin of satisfaction as he sees his TSM reporter having the last few words with the departing President.

"A very small but adoring crowd Mr. President, but no fanfare. Your comment, Sir."

"The Office of the President of the United States is the Highest Office on the Planet. When you take over the reins, you accept the Office with humbleness. And when it is time to hand over the reins, you exhibit even more humility. Now, we will leave it in the good hands of Mr. Walter Ferraro and the First Lady."

"Last words to the adoring crowd, Sir?"

"We cannot find words to express our gratitude and thanks for all the loving support you have given us. May God bless you and bless the United States of America."

The White House Staff and a small number of invited VIPs, many with tears in their eyes, wave enthusiastically as their beloved Commander-in-Chief takes

the final salute. Then one last wave from the First Couple.

The door closes behind them. They are now safely secured in their seats, likewise are their heads glued to the window.

The ground orientation changes as Marine One gracefully lifts off. It throws up a puff of dust as it makes one final gentle turn. The crowd bunches closer together forming into one tight knot showing their lasting love. Gradually, the crowd together with the White House behind them, fade away into the distance.

ON MARCH 10TH 2033, Wendell Hurst calls Herman with a few suggested headlines he had prepared for Rupentine. Herman is impressed with Wendell's lines which are immediately texted to Jeremiah. They both fly to Reno next day on their private jets, accompanied by Wendell. Then on to the Rupentine's residence in Lake Tahoe.

Herman introduces Wendell as an Advertising Guru from Madison Avenue. Also present are Milton Meredith, Thomas Brown and Jack Steiner. Wendell is soon making his presentation to the group about the process he had followed to come up with some meaningful and engaging headlines.

He explains how the theory evolved.

“A headline or ‘Line’ in the history of political persuasion never seemed to be so imperative to get absolutely correct. Besides, it has to connect. The word ‘Connect’ became an important part of my thinking process. I recall reading about the Eurotunnel, ‘Light at the End of the Tunnel’, an overused, misused and abused terminology that is often hyped and leads to nowhere.”

“We need something fresher; then I remembered the so called ‘*impact*’ made when the two huge tunnel boring machines met and connected somewhere under the English Channel.”

‘Impact’ would be a great word to use so I kept trying to work it into the headline, but putting it in the correct context proved to be difficult and I had to give up after struggling with it for almost two days.

Jeremiah, always as cool as a cucumber looks to see how well his colleagues are receiving the message. Rupentine taps his fingers on his knees, Steiner narrows his eyes and looks puzzled, Thomas Brown busily chews his fingernails and Herman shows a very relaxed and satisfying grin admiring his guru from Madison Avenue. Meredith... he appears to be finding it

hard to stay awake.

Celine interrupts and asks them if they are ready for lunch. Frank, obviously excited, not about lunch but about the progress and how the theory was developing, asks her in the most polite way if she could just prepare some sandwiches. Celine promptly asks for their preference.

The preference is 'no preference.' Any of her wonderful sandwiches would do fine.

Frank explains to her he could see a breakthrough coming for his forthcoming Peace Conference so he begged her forgiveness for being so curt. She acknowledges the comment and says she will be back in 30 minutes with sandwiches, tea and coffee.

Wendell picks up from where he left off. "One hundred twenty-six headlines later, one particular idea keeps coming back to my mind."

By now, Frank expects the punch line to hit the floor and shows even more signs of impatience. Wendell continues with his presentation as if it were a typical grandstanding sales pitch delivery. This is often the way it's presented to a corporate audience before they sign off on a quarter

of a million-dollar headline. And justify a good day's work before the mandatory liquid lunch.

This confirms Frank's beliefs expressed to Celine while he was still in Office. 'Smartass advertising pricks indulging in self-love. Legends in their own lunch time... Focus on the man not the message.' If it were somebody else other than Wendell exhibiting such self-aggrandizing behavior to a different group, he would have added a number of expletives to describe exactly how he felt.

But he has been wrong too often in the past and judged people prematurely and wrongly or indeed assumed he knew their motives. Could this be another direct consequence of his bipolar medical condition?

Thereupon, he changes his mind and decides to enjoy the rest of the show knowing that Wendell was speaking from his heart and only wants the best for the President to succeed. Instantly, he feels calmer and more relaxed, needless to say, it could not have been the ArmBand because he had given it the day off.

So Wendell, completely engrossed in his own enthusiasm on such a big day continues, "I had concluded that it had

made the cut ahead of the rest. It is the one I felt I had to choose. I purposely ignored it for a while and I was determined to fight it and see if I could resist the temptation for its use. Would it stand the test of time, even though it was for a short 48-hour period. If it did make it, then in my mind, it would be a winning line."

Frank is now listening very attentively but as usual somewhat impatient listening to the twists and turns as to how Wendell arrives at his final conclusion, if there ever was going to be one. All this while keeping an objective look at how the story 'line' develops.

Jack interrupts, "Wendell, have we turned over the front cover as yet?"

A polite giggle follows.

Rupentine piles on, "Still on Chapter One."

Wendell now pulls a fast one. "Gentlemen that's exactly the reaction I have been waiting for, a relaxed smile on everybody's face, it means you're enjoying it."

More grins but a gentle applause follows.

"So here's your reward, finally, I could

see the big picture. The Train Line. Two Lines meet. They become one. It is the Line of Peace. **Shalom to Salaam**. As you know both words mean Peace. Salaam has a double 'a.' It sounds better than Salam with just one 'a'. More Arabic. So in my mind, I called it Shalom-Salaam Connection. Better still, Shalom-Salaam Peace Connection. But we need to give it life and more sparkle, we need to activate it. So I had to write other lines to expand it."

Frank now swallows hard and continues to tap his fingers silently on his knees.

"Last call. Shalom-Salaam Peace Connection. But I don't like the word *Last*, because in itself, it dashes hope."

"Final Call for Shalom-Salaam Peace Connection. All on board. Perhaps, a little bit better but still it limits hope. It's kind of finite and the line itself probably a little bit too long."

"Shalom-Salaam Peace Connection' sounds better, it offers continuity and therefore hope. If not fixed in 2033, hopefully 2034 or 2035."

"Let me remind you gentlemen that everything that is ever sold is sold based on either *fear* or *hope* and sometimes you can't tell one from the other. But I'll stop

at that; I apologise I tend to get carried away, at times ... most of the times. Thank you."

Everybody in the room express appreciation and a sign of relief shows on their faces.

Jack Steiner, never shy of throwing in a curly tells Wendell, "Absolutely excellent Wendell, we understand your rationale perfectly, but let me ask you, do they pay you by the number of words or just for the final headline?"

Unlike the stereotype advertising creative directors, Wendell was very approachable and people-loving and burst into an almost uncontrollable laugh, likewise did the rest.

Frank lets the laughter subside then says, "Hold it right there Wendell."

He gets up, walks to Wendell, stands behind his chair, clamps his hands on his shoulders and presses them hard. Unseen by Wendell, Frank raises his eyebrows, widen his eyes and says, "Wendell you are a marvel, thank you. I like your line, it's short and to the point and I will use it. I like the distinction you made between Last and Final and then the choice of a simple line using the KISS philosophy. It shows depth of thinking."

Wendell takes this as a full complement as he smiles and shows a tremendous sense of satisfaction – a much stronger feeling than the one he usually gets from the corporate world.

Frank continues, “Your Line gave me an idea which otherwise wouldn’t have entered my mind in a million years.”

“Just hold on for one minute please.” He calls Celine, “Celiine, darling.”

“They’re coming, they’re coming. Just keep focusing.”

“Not the sandwiches, Celine. The maps.”

“Maps? What maps?”

“The maps of the Middle East, Israel, West Bank. They are all open on my Desk. Can you bring them in here, please?”

“That means your sandwiches will be delayed.”

“That’s okay, darling, we can live with that.”

So a few moments later, she walks in with a tray full of sandwiches.

“What happened to the maps?”

“Mr. President, Sir, with respect, nobody interferes in my kitchen, not even

the President of the United States. Ex-President, I should say." A polite grin appears on everybody's face.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, did you hear that? Where's the Labaneh spread, Haloumi slices, Jibne baida, Feta cheese?" utters Frank.

"You will have to wait to get to Jericho before you get that. Maps are coming up."

"Okay gentlemen, let's get stuck in these sandwiches. Celine knows quite a bit about Palestine. Arab blood from 3 generations ago runs in her veins."

Celine comes in with the maps. "Were you talking about me?"

"I was saying how great your sandwiches are. Is that right darling, you trace your ancestry back to Palestine. Was it Jericho?"

"For the fiftieth time, Ramallah. 150 years ago. Even the Green Card has lost its color. Don't change their map too much. They are very sensitive proud people when it comes to heritage."

"Good sense of humor. I am not sure what I would do without her."

Sandwiches out of the way, the table was soon cleared for a big map of Israel,

West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

“Back to your ideas Wendell, we could bring the Palestinians to the 21st Century. I love old customs, old traditions, the old donkey and cart, all of that.”

“But for the multitude of Palestinians, we need to improve their lot, particularly their mode of transport. We need to make it not only convenient for them, but affordable to enable thousands to visit their relatives far away within Israel, the Gaza strip and Jordan. Hopefully a way out into the Western World. So you know what I am on about.”

He turns to and addresses Wendell.

“So your line scored perfectly – not only as a political metaphor, but also in reality – transport facilities, which is the essence of the package they will be offered and ease of transport is the solution.”

“I do apologize for a dramatic monologue which is about to follow but unless I get my thoughts out quickly, they will probably be lost forever. That being said, let me put this little recorder on.”

“Hell, we committed \$275 billion to achieve peace with Russia, surely, we can keep the lid down on this part of the Middle East which is strategically

important to us and equally vital to Israel. I am thinking of a funding arrangement of twenty-five billion dollars, tops thirty.”

“By the way Wendell, today you are one participating in the most elite foreign policy groups of this Presidency. Your lips must be – –”

“- zipped, Mr. President.”

“We will upgrade the infrastructure within Israel and Palestine assuming we can get a peace agreement. It will be funded jointly by the US, the EU and the World Bank which exists mostly with our money. The EU will chip in with their Euros, and the U.S. which has the primary interest in monitoring and helping with world peace, well, we need to help out accordingly.”

“China is out completely. No work, no infrastructure, no railway stock and no Belt and Road. I feel guilty saying that since I do tend to say it with a sense of satisfaction.”

“It would be an electrified line, not a Japanese Shinkansen, not a French Grande Vitesse, but a simple modern line, but a spacecraft when compared to donkeys and old vehicles that cannot be treasured or maintained forever.”

“In addition, we will upgrade the Yasser Arafat International Airport which has been decommissioned since maybe 2004. It will become a decent airstrip in the West Bank to handle average-sized jets the size of a 737. Finally, a decent seaport with a small but modern Container Terminal in the Gaza Strip, large enough to handle cargo ships and tourist cruise liners.”

“The construction of the Line will be carried out in phases. I would rather see a section finished and becoming completely operational than a whole project that would be switched on at once and opened with some super ceremony worthy of the World Cup.”

“So let’s all get our heads around this map. The Line has to serve both Israelis and Palestinians alike. It should also enable easy access to the Palestinians to travel to Amman in Jordan where about 3 million of them live, most of them



refugees from way back.”

“We follow the coastline with train stations from Tel Aviv to Bat Yam, Ashdod, Ashkelon. These are already operational but we can upgrade them. That would please the Israelis.”

“The new line will continue from

Ashkelon to Gaza City, Deir Al Balah, Khan Yunis, Rafah, Karem Shalom, Beer Sheva, Hebron, Bethlehem, East Jerusalem, Jericho, Ramallah, Tel Aviv.”

“A secondary line will branch from East Jerusalem to Amman.”

“The third line will be an intra-West Bank. It connects primarily Palestinian towns in the West Bank – Jericho, Nablus, Janin, Nazareth, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, Ramallah and terminating in Jericho.”

Frank starts drawing the lines connecting towns. “The dashed black line is the existing train line that will be upgraded. It is a plus, plus for the Israelis. The other lines will benefit all.”

“Remember lots of the labor required for building the tracks will be carried out by local Palestinians with improved wages but nowhere near those matching Western labor rates. I reckon that \$25 to \$30 billion spread over a ten-year plan would do it.”

“Of course all the above is subject to strict adherence to the continuity of peace as laid out by the US. It would need to be agreed by both sides subject to funding being approved. The project and funds to both sides will be immediately stopped if the agreement is broken.”

“This initiative could turn this part of the Middle East into a dynamic hub for light industry. This is one strategic benefit I would need to sell and get the international community to accept and invest in. There is a pool of talent out there that needs to be unleashed that will give the Palestinian nation self-esteem.”

“Above all, this would necessitate the recognition of the State of Israel by the Palestinians. Palestine becomes a completely sovereign nation; Gaza Strip will become part of Palestine proper governed from the West Bank and other provisos still to be mapped out.”

“Well, I think we have it all solved, at least in our minds. More precisely, in my own mind. Now we need to sell it.”

Rupentine points to his head. “I am the Newspaper. I am the Headline.”

He looks at Wendell. “Wendell, can you get me what we agreed on today, documented on your letterhead. It would be easier for the incumbent President to follow what we discussed and it would certainly enable him to make his decisions easier.”

“I will lay my Head on the Negotiating Table. Thank you for showing your commitment to this project and offering

your services. That shows dedication.”

“I guess that concludes the day. Are you flying out tonight or staying in town?”

The answer was uniform. ‘Flying out.’

One last drink followed and soon they were all out of the house.

Chapter 20

*The last piece of the puzzle - Middle East
diplomacy.*

20

On March 21st 2033, Frank finds himself sitting on the unfamiliar side of the Oval Office Desk.

One President faces another.

“Glad to see you, Frank. I understand you made a lot of progress on your ideas and preparations, so what have you got?”

Frank goes over what happened during the last 3 weeks, the meeting he had with Herman, Jeremiah, the NIFAI directors, discussions with Jack Steiner, the ideas, briefs and the headlines from Wendell Hurst.

Walter listens carefully and is quite excited about the approach and very impressed with the time that Frank had put into his study of this Middle East Hot Spot.

Frank presents the official communication that Wendell wrote with regards to the headlines and the intricate thought process that preceded it. Walter reads it carefully and is duly captivated by its detail.

Frank then tells him that aiming for some time in May or early June would be suitable. He emphasizes that the negotiations would be tough with an approach and resolve needed similar to the one he displayed when he negotiated the Russian Agreement.

The ArmBand would come in handy, as a matter of fact it would be required. He stresses that the NIFAI directors need to be on the spot in London housed at the Embassy. This will ensure that monitoring is effective and available immediately for possible manual intervention in case the ArmBand develops a glitch.

Even before Frank finishes his justification, Walter politely stops him and tells him he has a free reign and it is best to talk directly to Jack Steiner who would see to any of his needs.

The reasoning behind this is obvious. Walter's Legacy would be tainted if this peace initiative were to go belly-up.

Walter says he will talk to Tom Hawkins

about the separate UK funding since they were outside the EU, similarly he will discuss the funding directly with the EU President. The Secretary of State would talk to the World Bank President.

The incumbent President feels that he would need to give the United Nations heads up on the peace mission. But with no involvement which pleases Frank no end. This is not a show for the United Nations since both presidents considered the UN as the archetypal Paper Tiger.

"You will be accompanied by the Secretary of State and fly on Air Force Two, including Mrs. Rupentine and your staff. Arrangements for aircraft travel for other special members can be arranged through Jack Steiner," says Walter.

On the subject of the U.S. funding amount, Walter would need to talk to the State Department, Appropriations Committee and Department of Finance. Somebody within Finance and State will have to come up with an estimate, preferably one from each department and see how close they get.

However, the estimate would include all that Frank has put in front of him, namely, upgrades, three railway lines, seaport, airport facilities, electrical and power

infrastructure for the Gaza Strip and for the West Bank over a period of ten years. Early in the term, there would be major expenditure, with about 75% spent in the first 5 years. People need to see progress being made at a steady rate and not just limping along.

Equally important is that Frank talks to the Israeli Prime Minister first and dangle the Aid Package. After the basic understanding, he would talk to the Palestinian President to get agreement using the Aid Package as an inducement. All overseas expenses incurred by their dignitaries would be borne by the U.S.

One has to bear in mind that a number of world problems emanate from the Middle East and then indirectly they burden the U.S. with peace keeping headaches. China usually profits from picking up the scraps and the business generated from the turmoil.

Frank thinks funding should be in this proportion IMF 50% (\$12.5 billion), U.S. 25.0% (\$6.25 billion), EU 20% (\$5.0 billion), UK 5% (\$1.25 billion). The sovereign nations' contributions will be in the form of grants.

Most hot-rolled steel will be supplied by the U.S. as well as the airport

development and construction. Train locomotives and stock to be supplied by the EU, with the UK supplying Information Technology and setting up of Financial Services. Korea and Japan will help with the Container Port, its Automation and medium-sized cargo vessels.

Frank asks Thomas and Milton to fly to London and base themselves at the Embassy taking with them the required equipment. He indicates that this is desirable. He also asks Thomas Brown for a backup ArmBand. In the meantime, he would tell Jack Steiner to have them flown out incognito.

The conference is opened by Tom Hawkins on June 6th at Chequers. In attendance are Frank Rupentine, the U.S. Secretary of State, Mr. David Levy who is the Israeli Prime Minister and Mr. Ahmed Hadid, the Palestinian President. Also present are a skeleton of their negotiators, the rest of their aides were scattered in various hotels in London.

Walter Ferraro appears live from the Oval Office, and in conjunction with Tom Hawkins in London he declares the Peace Initiative 'Open'. The big banner carrying the Headline: *Shalom-Salaam Peace*

Connection is displayed in the background. The World Media is there and amongst them, Herman Kraut's TSM.

Frank requests maximum aggression, determination and decisiveness in his ArmBand with an instantaneous Trinitas response. Confident that this will be the case, he would not budge from the position that he would take. But amidst all this, he keeps his composure and with that, the first informal meeting gets under way. Its objective could be described as getting to know each other and as expected ends up in disagreements.

It is an opportunity for Frank to lay down the law, to put it bluntly a 'take it or leave it' approach as was the case in his past negotiations.

The main objection comes from the Israelis and not unexpectedly, security issues are at the top of their list of concerns. They appear to be uncompromising.

The Palestinians know too well that their traditional leverage has always been and will always be weak compared to that exercised by their powerful neighbor armed to the teeth.

On all sides, the feeling is cordial, polite and very civilized. The atmosphere is

vastly different to the toxic air experienced in past peace talks, where it would have been more akin to carrying guns and bullets instead of pen and paper.

The negotiators share some brief moments with the Press and a few drinks afterwards. That gives them the opportunity to mix well, shake hands, get close and for a lack of a better word, feel each other.

Frank instructs them that during coffee breaks, tea breaks, lunch breaks and around the lunch tables, there should be absolutely no evidence of cliques exchanging pleasantries and making small talk with whom they felt comfortable.

To be blunt, he says that he wants to see them in groups of three or four; one American, one Palestinian, one Israeli and one Englishman / woman. It will be up to them how to form their group.

At table, the seating arrangement is organized according to the above dictum. On a daily basis, Frank switches as to who sits on his immediate right and who sits on his left with predictable boredom. But it proves fundamental to the success of the negotiations.

Progress is made but the chapter is far from closed. In six days' time they are on

their way home to consult with their governments with more agreements than disagreements, but just one broken link renders the chain useless.

FRANK MEETS THE U.S. President on June 13th 2033, to brief him on the progress-to-date.

Even while in a meeting with Frank, Walter is promptly on the phone to the Israeli Prime Minister David Levy. He tells him he shares the same feelings with Frank who is present with him at that very moment and they are on the same page. A veiled threat but an extremely subtle one involved the negotiations between the two countries on a batch of new aircraft, the most advanced.

Walter says he has enough problems with Congress and approving a \$25 billion package could be difficult unless the Israeli Prime Minister appears more flexible to the proposed Chequers peace proposal.

Walter discusses the concern about the width of the buffer zone making the point that, what Israel wanted was disproportionate and is not worth a 'bucket of warm piss.' That line was first uttered by John Nance Garner, known among his contemporaries as "Cactus

Jack," elected as 32nd Vice President of the U.S. It was completely in a different context but with similar parallels.

Walter makes it clearly known to Mr. Levy that he is in no jovial or conciliatory frame of mind when it comes to unnecessary blocks in the road, and continues the conversation.

"So, we drop that point and move on to the arms issue. We have to consider Palestine with the dignity that it deserves and the need for them to have some arms to suppress any insurgency quick and fast. A dozen or so light tanks and a fleet of Armored Personnel Carriers is absolutely no threat to Israel. You don't expect them to come charging into Israel with this equipment. We will need to supply them with these arms, at minimum."

"Now to the Airspace. It is imperative for the U.S. to control but it will be run by Palestinian nationals trained in the United States."

"Mr. Levy, please consider this carefully. This is your Legacy, Frank's Legacy and my Legacy. Your nation is not threatened by any of these three so called concerns."

"After finishing this call, I will be talking to the Palestinian President and

tell him not to get his tail up.”

“Just one second please, David.” He covers the mouth piece and stares at Rupentine for one whole minute. He apologises to Mr. Levy for the second time and holds out for another minute... and then continues.

“Anyway, I think that is just about it. I have an important call from London. Have a successful day and we’ll talk soon. Call me if you have a problem with what we have discussed and if it requires my attention.”

“Good phantom call Mr. President,” says Frank.

Walter smiles. “Old corporate trick, Frank. It diffuses, confuses and loses. In that order.”

He buzzes his secretary to get him Mr. Ahmed Hadid.

Walter tells Frank that the word ‘Hadid’ means iron. “He must be a strongman, however, extremely polite when I talked to him. Let me write the Arabic greetings response ‘Walaikum AsSalam.’ I have to appear smart.”

“Hello Ahmed, how are you? This is Walter, U.S. President.”

“Salaam Alaikum,” says Hadid.

“Walaikum AsSalam,” replies Walter with a practiced Arabic pronunciation.

“I am very well Mr. President. I hope and trust in Allah and of course in your God that he looks after you, your family and Mr. Rupentine and his family. That line of Shalom-Salaam Peace Connection is an absolute hit. People love it. Was Mr. Rupentine in Advertising before he became President?”

“No Ahmed, but he has friends in that business.” He could hear Ahmed chuckling.

“I reviewed the talks with Frank who is in my office right now. He mentioned a little impasse. What are your feelings?”

“Well thank him very much. Our people see themselves first and foremost fighting for pride. Everything else had been taken away from them, houses, land, property. Two thousand years of history will not be bought with a \$25 billion package. But of course, we are most appreciative. And forever indebted,” says President Hadid.

Then he continues, “We can live with the border, not as wide as the Israelis asked for though. The people will take it as an insult. If I force them to accept it,

then we would be starting on the wrong foot and you are throwing good money after bad. But it could work out well as a little bargaining chip.”

Walter interrupts, “On that point Ahmed, I have told David that the width of the buffer zone is not acceptable.”

“Regarding arms, Mr. President, we are only asking for equipment to control situations that may arise within our borders. Nothing more.”

“The Air Traffic Control, I am happy with how you want to educate our people and manage it in the meantime.”

Walter interrupts again, “For the record Ahmed, I have made my strong views known on the two points you have just mentioned.”

“Fisheries could be an issue but I am sure we will find a solution. Remember our people are either farmers or fishermen in the main.”

“Your package is like Manna from Heaven. Our people will be educated again and will play their part on the big stage, God willing.”

“My big problem, and one that I own, is to disarm our factions, get unity between the people within Gaza and between Gaza

and the West Bank. It is only us who can do that. But not without America's help. Your big silent part is the money. No unity, no money for Gaza, no Airport, no Container Terminal, no Railway. 80% of the \$25 billion is the Palestinian's share."

"We will need to emphasize this to the materially-impoveryshed ordinary Palestinians of Gaza and to the Hamas factions. But of course, without making the Israelis jealous and resentful of the deal."

"Iran is the source of funds in the Gaza. Cut them off and our people will have to look for another source. With your wonderful new weapon, you are in a position to help choke those funds. I can only emphasize the benefits for their families and education for their children through peace."

"So I don't have a problem. If the Israelis can agree, my next task is to get the unity within Palestine."

"Ahmed, I am very impressed with the pragmatic position you're taking. As I said, Frank is in my office right now. He wants to wish you well."

Frank quickly exchanges pleasantries and both thank each other for the effort.

“Okay Ahmed, let’s hope that we can get the Peace meeting moving again in a month’s time, so keep safe. Thank you.”

The next Chequers meeting is scheduled for August 1st, 2033 when one would hope that most of the differences would have been resolved. Both Israeli and Palestinian Governments pass the basic bills. Now it is up to the negotiators to work out the finer details. It would still need a bit of work on behalf of the Palestinians to sell it to Hamas.

As Mr. Hadid had mentioned there is a substantial problem with so many warring factions that would need to be disarmed. The benefits to the ordinary people are continuously hammered on the airwaves and in the press.

Effectively, it is a ‘divide and conquer approach’. Mr. Hadid and the faction heads meet on a number of occasions. Even the top echelons are offered something in return, one might call them little bribes to buy their support. Money always talks. Through tougher banking laws that had been introduced cash from Iran slowly evaporates and the effect is soon felt.

Israel starts dragging its feet in the negotiations, but they also show

extraordinary eagerness to complete the deal, not only for achieving genuine peace, but also to address their strategic arms strategy for the next thirty years. An agreement would pave the way for the acquisition of a number of advanced aircraft. The U.S. Department of Defense informs them of technical hitches that were going to put the deal back by a few months.

The Israeli Prime Minister hears the message loud and clear.

In the meantime, Iran piles on the pressure with their new missile technology. Help from Russia dries up completely keeping in accordance with the peace agreement they had signed with the U.S.

In view of continued armed shipments from Iran to Gaza, the U.S. decides to publish pictures of various wrecks still floating in the Persian Gulf which present a danger to shipping. They ask for tenders from two U.S. salvage companies operating in the area.

The pictures are widely published in the region, enough for Iran to study them carefully. The U.S. companies are informed by the State Department that this is 'decoy diplomacy' and a National

Security issue.

A covert operation takes place in the middle of the night with F-16s taking off and then dropping a few M.D.A. Bermuda Vortex bombs. The boats disappear and sink to the bottom of the serene Gulf Waters.

Iran is not impressed and other shipments continue. Few days later, assets owned and operated by the Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force are attacked by the F-16s. A number of their boats are sunk and Revolutionary Guards' installations along the Iranian shores are rendered useless. It is in retaliation to what the U.S. describes as an attempt to sabotage the talks and endanger the Middle East peace talks.

Even with the demonstration of the new fire power displayed by the U.S. in sinking ships at will and without trace, the Guards put a token resistance which soon fades away. They receive instructions from Teheran not to retaliate in case Iranian sites on the mainland get smoked out.

The arms soon stop flowing. The cash follows suit, the steady stream drops to a trickle. A couple of months later all the factions in Gaza surrender their arms, munitions and give up their missile

manufacturing bases which present a constant menace to Israel.

Now everything is clear for peace to proceed. A formal agreement is signed in Ramallah between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Gaza Leaders who are promised a role in the new soon-to-be Government of the State of Palestine.

RUPENTINE KICKS OFF the meeting addressing his guests, "Tom, Ahmed, David, thank you. This is a historic journey. A big thank you also goes to my President for his encouragement and assistance with these negotiations and wishing us well."

Thomas Brown and Milton Meredith are monitoring Frank's performance and they increase his confidence level realizing this is crunch time.

"Agree. A little boost going to Rupentine - and just a touch of aggression. Picking up."

A thought is forever present in Rupentine's mind. It's the big ask ... Sign on the line that's dotted!! Rupentine shuffles papers searching for his next comment. He is now feeling more confident. "We will be there - at the finishing line."

“Shalom-Salaam Peace Connection? What’s in the name, what’s in the words? It’s active, it’s fluid, it engages the thought process, promotes conversation which converts to positive action. We have discussed this already but it is extremely important that I go through it again, today.”

“Excellent point. Very true,” says Tom.

“I want to open up opportunities. Donkeys, horses, carts. That’s the affectionate past. Good for tourism. Convenient transport is the future.”

“You’re hitting the nail on the head,” says Hadid.

“An upgrade of the existing train line in the West. David, this is absolutely great for your country. A new circular connection – Ashkelon to Gaza, on to Bethlehem, then to Tel Aviv. It is beneficial to both nations. Win Win.”

“What about the North?” asks Levy.

“Tel Aviv to Amman line. A high-speed upgrade. Big Business boost. A huge bonanza. Three million Palestinians live in Amman. Jericho, Nablus, Nazareth, Ramallah. Again a win win.”

“Infrastructure?” asks Hadid.

“An upgrade to the Israeli airport and the one in the West Bank, desalination plants in the Gaza Strip, roads, seaport and then the jewel. Peace.”

Rupentine looks them directly in the eyes.

“Let’s have your thoughts.” And Rupentine looks purposely at his watch.

“I am sure we can overcome this 2000-year-old impasse. We want peace,” adds Hadid.

“Yesterday you had a fundamental difference. Is that solved now?”

Hadid looks at Levy, and Levy then opens up.

“Actually two. The security zone and arms supply to the Palestinian State are still matters we need to address.”

Meredith mumbles to himself, “Let’s see. Time to get tough.” He hits in some additional buttons.

“David and Ahmed, these differences have already been discussed by my President with both of you, personally, and you know his position. I am absolutely on the same page with the President. His position has not changed and it will not change, neither would mine. Assuming

you get over these differences, do you acknowledge the existence of both states as being separate states? Do I get a 'Yes' from both of you?"

They nod.

"Come on let's keep this moving. I see it, but I don't hear it."

"Absolutely, Israel has the right to exist."

"Yes, we will acknowledge the State of Palestine as an Independent State that incorporates the West Bank and the Gaza strip."

"And, and?" insists Rupentine.

"All Jewish settlements will abide by the laws of the State of Palestine with freedom of travel to both."

"Great. The \$25 billion will click in when you resolve your minor issues. Please resolve them. This meeting will restart tomorrow. Let's get out and check some country spots."

The next day Rupentine walks into the room and finds the mood looks rather somber.

"Unfortunately, we still have some fine points..." says Levy.

“... outstanding is what David is trying to say. I’m sorry, we tried. My people will take the security zone as an insult.”

Tom confers with Hadid in private. Rupentine takes David out of earshot.

“I will see Walter in the morning.”

“Tell him I tried,” says Levy.

“Not hard enough. Forget diplomacy for now. No agreement, no new F-35s, not a single wing, let alone a frame without an engine. Think about it.”

Levy indicates some compromise to Frank. “Please. Change my message to Walter. Tell him, I will do my best.”

And with that, the meeting comes to an end and they all head home.

Now on the plane returning from Chequers. Rupentine, Milton and Thomas are traveling together on Air Force Two. Frank takes a call from Ahmed Hadid, the Palestinian President.

“Mr. President. All done. Agreed on a deal. David Levy will email you.”

Rupentine comes to life again, he straightens up in his seat, his eyes are wide open and his jaw drops. “I am elated, Ahmed. I don’t know what to say. I am really lost for words and I am very happy

for you and David and most of all for all the people in both nations. Have a safe journey home. You have made history. I think it's the President on the other cell."

"Excellent, Frank. David Levy just called me on behalf of the Israeli Government. He said your phone was engaged..."

"... Engaged? Huh. My phone engaged! What else! I had to put the screws on him. But I love both of them."

"What can I say Frank? You're very much like the other Frank. You've always done it your way. A few more months and then the Official Signing. Have a safe trip home."

"Don't overlook the power of NIFAI and the ArmBand," says Frank.

"Milton... Thomas..., come over here. We have a deal. Thomas, please ask for the best Champagne. Milton, please give me a calmer. My heart is racing."

The captain walks towards Frank.

"Sir, the plane is on autopilot. We have been diverted to Reno."

The Captain motions to the stewardess. On cue, music blares out - it's Frank Sinatra.

“On the President’s order. He gave us the CD before we left Dulles. Your preference I understand, ‘My Way.’”

“Well, I’ll be fucked!”

“Mis-ter President! A gentle calmative pill perhaps?” says Milton.

THE WHOLE PROCESS dragged to the latter weeks of late November.

It is agreed that the Middle East Peace Agreement would be signed in England at Chequers on January 9th 2034. It is three years to the day when the attack on North Korea and China took place.

It would officially come into force four months after the Treaty had been signed in London.

Planning and Blueprints for the Railway Lines, Container and Airport upgrades are already well under way.

To keep all parties happy and representative of their efforts in these milestone negotiations, the ceremonies would be repeated in Gaza, Ramallah and in Jerusalem.

The final ceremony takes place in Washington at the White House on May 1st 2034, this time with full pomp, marching bands, gun salutes, fly pasts, nothing is

spared. All the Heads of States of the G9 are in attendance. That includes Russia which features prominently during the Ceremony with praises sung very loudly to let the world know of its contribution to the global peace process, if nothing else.

All the EU and NATO countries are also represented. In addition, all the Heads of State of South East Asia and Africa are there. China, understandably abstains.

So, another set of historic documents are signed and exchanged on this bright sunny day in Washington DC.

The Peace Accord survives the first few months without a hitch.

Skirmishes between Israelis and Palestinians are reduced to zero. Most arms are surrendered and destroyed. A whole new psyche descends on the Palestinian people. A sense of achievement is in the air. The mood is happier, positive and all of a sudden, the people seem to be far more open-minded than in the past decades. Hope is instilled and prosperity is on the way.

The infrastructure of the railway line starts and obvious progress is clearly evident in the Gaza Strip, itself now part of the Palestinian State. New power stations are being built, a huge

desalination plant is in the works, basic roads are repaired, new ones designed, upgraded or ready for construction. Sewerage systems are upgraded with new treatment plants in four main areas of the Strip. All new infrastructure necessitated planning from the bottom up with most communication lines laid under the ground to get rid of tangled electrical cables and wiring, an eyesore on every street in Gaza.

The whole place is indeed buzzing.

The railway line construction starts in earnest within the West Bank. Likewise, the upgrading of the existing Tel Aviv-Ashkelon line.

And all the population in Israel seem to be more relaxed about the long-term future in the absence of the constant menace from rogue Palestinian missiles.

Chapter 21

Rupentine is in the cross hairs of Chinese and Korean assassins.

21

Frank nods off to sleep but he is restless. The clock on the wall shows four in the morning, so he turns the TV off. His books are open; biography notes lie scattered on the couch and a writing pad rests on his lap. He looks for the ballpoint pen but he cannot locate it. It is sitting behind his ear. He grabs it as it falls off then scribbles the word 'Library' and nods off again.

"Breakfast, darling."

Rupentine staggers into the room, rubbing his eyes.

"Your favorite breakfast. Low fat yogurt, cereal, blueberries and prunes to keep you going. Late night again?"

"I couldn't sleep, Library, Autobiography, Middle East, The

Cenotaph ... Oh! That's right, it is set for February 21st."

"I suppose there is no rest for the wicked."

"In the eyes of the Chinese and North Koreans I am always going to be in their bad books. I feel, wherever I go, I will have cross hairs on my back."

"Surely your new Big Daddy computer must be generating some useful intel by now. We have ample security so we should feel safer," says Celine.

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 2034 a definite increase in the amount of chatter is evident in Europe amongst cyberpunks and phishers.

Then in November, sustained cryptic conversations amongst two groups attract special attention. This chatter now includes communications between Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing.

One month later, Big Daddy picks up the terrorists' scent in Guadalajara. Homeland Security is now involved with enough concern to let the President know they could be on to something.

An alert is passed by Big Daddy to Homeland Security. It is in the usual short snappy coded phrases.

It reads as follows: *'Based in Japan. Other Group is within the U.S. Languages: Korean and Cantonese. Hackers on the move. Currently crossed Southern Border. Today's stop Dallas. Documents checked. Destination NYC. Contacts at Bronx. Intended address: Apartment 4, 991 Fremont Avenue, Bronx.'*

Homeland informs the President that the terrorist cell is being tracked. No immediate threat detected.

Big Daddy sets this group high up on its priority list. The terrorist cell leaves New York and starts making its way westwards stopping in restaurants with Korean or Japanese fish on their menus as delicacies often picked fresh from the in-house aquariums.

The chatter activity moves closer to Nevada and settles in the San Francisco area. By now their hideout is firmly established and bugged. Their conversations are with people in the premier fish markets of Tokyo's Tsukiji and Seoul's Noryangjin.

Most certainly fish is on the menu. But it is of the deadly variety. It is catastrophic to humans if cooked by amateurs and even worse if prepared by professional chefs if their intention is to kill.

The Japanese Fugu is known as Bok in Korean, the Chinese Pufferfish known as Hetun. They are beautiful to look at but lethal if served at dinner.

If consumed by humans, symptoms will typically develop within 30 minutes of ingestion, but could be delayed by up to four hours. However, if the dose is fatal, symptoms are usually present within 17 minutes of the first taste.

Respiratory distress, nausea, vomiting, sweating and other symptoms appear in rapid succession until the body is completely paralyzed but often remaining conscious and occasionally completely lucid until death occurs within 4 to 6 hours. But the inevitable death could also arrive much, much quicker.

The fish could be flown in from Japan and available in California within 24 hours ready to be consumed. Only FDA-approved distributors and restaurants could legally serve it.

The bug in the terrorists' hideout reveals that a senior South Korean Government Official who is a personal friend of Frank Rupentine is due to visit him in the next few weeks.

Immediately, surveillance is ordered by the Japanese Authorities on the Tsukiji market distributors of such fish. Export details about consignments going to the

U.S. irrespective of date of shipment or precise destination are now being constantly monitored and passed to the CIA.

All intel is being gathered from Korean, Japanese and Chinese restaurants in the Nevada area until the ex-President's choice of restaurant could be narrowed down to one or two.

The FBI and Homeland security agents are on full alert.

The terrorists' conversation indicates that the South Korean's visit is scheduled for January 5th 2035. The restaurant had been booked in the name of Kang Song-ho, a senior South Korean Government member of the National Assembly in Seoul.

The State Department and Homeland Security receive a copy of that reservation and booking confirmation. It is the Full Moon Restaurant, an establishment which is fully licensed by the FDA to serve the Bok delicacy.

Records supplied by the FBI show that specialist chefs, had been hired during the last fortnight by the restaurant owner, Mr. Park Sung. One of the chefs turns out to be a Chinese National, Hwang Gao, who carries a false Korean Passport. He himself is a specialist in the preparation of the Chinese Pufferfish - the Hetun.

Big Daddy discovers that Hwang Gao is a secret Beijing Government Operative who is wanted for poisoning in two different restaurants in Taiwan. He finds his way to Korea mysteriously early September the previous year. The passports he uses for his travels are produced in Beijing.

A check on the owner reveals a national of South Korea but one with a murky past. Park Sung is member of The Jopok – the Korean Mafia. After two years on the run in South Korea and with the help of a falsified passport he ends up in the U.S. and establishes a chain of successful eateries in the Frisco and Lake Tahoe areas, six in all.

The Secret Service protecting Frank Rupentine are informed of the situation.

Rupentine's Secret Service contacts the Full Moon Restaurant to confirm that a booking had been made and if there are issues, they should know about.

They are told all is fine and the owner hopes they would enjoy themselves while they are there on duty.

All agreed that the booking date is for January 5th at 7.00 pm.

As a precaution, two more Secret Service agents, completely under cover and appearing to be just another young

couple telephone the Full Moon Restaurant and book themselves for the evening.

According to the CIA, the Fugu and Hetun were delivered to the restaurant two nights before the dinner date. Presumably, the fish were put in separate tanks at the back of the kitchen hidden away from public view.

Back in Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo, the authorities are ready to move in, on cue from the CIA or the FBI.

The distinguished guests arrive at 6.45. Fifteen minutes earlier the Secret Service enter the building and go through the restaurant to familiarize themselves with the layout saying this is a standard precaution. They ask to be introduced to the owner and to be shown around.

In the meantime, the VIP guests are shown to their table by Park Sung himself and drinks were immediately served.

The owner turns his attention to the Secret Service. He looks a little nervous but is delighted to talk to them about the restaurant cuisine and then points out their table.

He tells them that guests get very apprehensive when they see Secret Service agents wearing dark glasses and talking into their microphones.

He takes them to the kitchen, introduces them briefly to the staff including the people preparing the fish. The two celebrity chefs look a bit anxious especially when the Secret Service agents stop by and gaze at the tanks.

The Agents take their dark glasses off and stare at the fish, seemingly admiring the beautiful colors of these creatures that soon would end up cut, boiled, fried and dried, and certainly dead on their guests' plates. And soon after that, the guests would be as dead as the half-eaten fish on their dishes.

The pictures of Fugu, Bok and Hetun are by now imprinted in the agents' minds and they could easily identify which fish is which while pointing and marveling at their colors.

One agent says to Park Sung, "Pretty, don't you think so. Can I touch?"

"No, No," is the quick answer from Park Sung.

"Bites?"

"No, No. Contamination. After touch not good for food. Cannot eat. We use special gloves to prepare."

"Ah, Ah, Ah," exclaims the agent.

"Would you like to see rest of kitchen?" asks Park Sung.

"Yes sure. Oh, by the way, this fish is American?"

"No, no special Japanese and Korean."

They could see that both chefs and the owner start sweating.

So the agent says, "Hot in here."

"Very, very hot Mister."

"Johnson, Mr. Jack Johnson. You can call me, Jack."

"Okay Jack, let's move on and get you a cold drink."

In the meantime, a third agent strides in, his head up in the air and sniffing the dampness around the aquariums. Then he stops about three feet away from where the chefs were standing and says, "I like the smell of fish," followed by a sarcastic smile.

Jack looks back at the first tank, then looks at Park Sung, "Before we go, Mr. Park, can you point out the Fugu, the Bok and the Hetun?"

Park's face turns ashen as soon as the Secret Service mentions the words Fugu, Bok and Hetun. He looks as if he himself had just eaten this double-edged delicacy.

In a flash the Agents pull out their guns.

"Up, Up, Up," indicating hands in the air.

They all oblige.

"We don't understand," says Park.

The Agent replies, "We will read very slowly so you all understand. You are all under arrest on charges of plotting to murder The President and Mr. Kang."

He reads them their rights. One sharp whistle and the place is swarming with Agents. At the same time, the Japanese move immediately on their targets in Tsukiji.

"Mr. President, Mr. Kang, distinguished ladies, please remain seated, all is under control," says the Agent.

They tell the guests in a very stern voice, "Please be quiet and do not panic. This is the Secret Service and the FBI. Some dangerous fish species have been found in this restaurant. They are still alive and potent. We do apologize but it is best that you leave. Now. The drinks and food are on the Federal Government."

The restaurant is deserted within three minutes.

All the restaurant staff are asked to be seated in a far corner for questioning about how this establishment operates and who's who. All this is carried out with absolute precision.

The owner and the chefs are escorted out and whisked away to the local police station in Reno to be questioned further.

FDA officials are contacted to come over and take care of the fish which had been spared for the night. The fish were to be kept alive as evidence.

The Senior Agent tells the ex-President of a new booking at the Peppermill Resort Spa in Reno and asks them if they are ready to leave.

Frank appears rather cool and asks if they could at least be served one more drink before they leave. The agent obliges saying he used to serve drinks in his early twenties.

Surveillance is put around the other five sister eateries followed by questioning of staff.

The meeting with the Rupentines is surprisingly delightful, warm and entertaining and certainly memorable. The Rupentines are invited to Seoul as soon as their schedule permits.

The next day Kang Song-ho meets the U.S. President to thank him for his Country's power and might in handling their North Korean adversary.

Walter says, "Thanks to Big Daddy."

"Big Daddy, who's that?"

“Oh, just an expression, what we collectively call our intel gathering process. Only between you and me.”

“Mr. President, I possess a little secret now. You have given me the name, but I have no clue what this is all about.”

“Mr. Kang, believe me, it’s better if it stays a secret.”

Chapter 22

Rupentine's assassins' cryptic rendezvous.

Bad Moon rising.



22

Hank Harrison is behind the wheel of his vehicle with his eyes fixed on the road ahead. He is in his mid-forties. Determination is written all over his chiseled face. The grip on the wheel is solid yet confident. His head bobs gently to the vibes from the Rhythm & Blues. The cell phone rings, he turns the radio down, his hand probes for the phone, but not in any hurry.

“This is Hank speaking. I am driving with one hand on the wheel.”

“Guess who - your psychiatrist, remember me?”

“Long time. Life is still empty, stepchildren gone, no wife, no family but I’m confident. I have one mission left... to find happiness. Oops, cops in my mirror,

better say bye for now. I will call you later.”

With his smile still on, his cell phone turned off, he turns the volume up again.

Inside Betty’s Diner, near the corner of Greenwood Avenue N and N 87th Street, Seattle, Jing-Ming-ho, a male of Korean extraction in his forties, walks in and takes a seat.

Betty, forty-five, is the charismatic owner-waitress. She approaches him for the order.

“Yes Sir.”

“Steak, bacon, eggs and chips,” replies Ming.

“By the way, this table is reserved. Drinks?”

“Beer please. Did you say reserved?”

“That’s what I said. Always same person, six on the dot.”

Ming moves to the next table, with his eyes still fixed on the entrance.

Six o’clock on the dot, a tall man steps inside and goes straight to his table. Hank Harrison waves to Betty.

“Usual, Betty,” yells Hank across the room.

Ming eyes Hank closely. Then he moves and sits across from him and places a neatly wrapped parcel on the table.

"You look fit and well."

"I don't know any Koreans. How come you're still here? I thought Rupentine sent all of you back home."

"He missed a few. That was eighteen months ago. Mark my words, it's survival of the fittest, Hank."

"How do you know my name?"

"I know a lot of things. Black Ops. Sharp shooter. In this packet, a large sum. Cell phones. Your cell is marked S.N.1. A letter inside has the detailed mission. The money is yours to keep whether you accept the mission or not. Enjoy your steak."

He pushes the packet gently towards Hank. Ming stands up, leaves a hundred-dollar bill on the table, bows and leaves. Betty goes to Hank's table, serves the meal and places that day's folded newspaper in front of him.

"Have you found your new love as yet? Kids still waiting in the air? C'mon Hank, settle down. And keep away from Koreans. Here, check the news."

Hank opens the newspaper. It carries a loud headline.

‘RUPENTINE: ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT. POISON FUGU FISH FOUND IN LAKE TAHOE RESTAURANT.’

“Thanks, Betty. SOBs. At it again,” says Hank.

Hank drives straight home, East of Greenwood Avenue about 4 blocks away along N 87th Street. He grabs himself a beer, sits down, scrutinizes the package. He sniffs it for explosives and slits it open. Ten thousand dollars. He examines the high-tech Chinese cell phones in minute detail. Then he reads the letter.

Hank calls Ming immediately afterwards. “No deal. Above VP five hundred thousand. Incumbent one million. Who do you have in mind?”

“Hank, too much. Will be in touch.”

“Eight o’clock, tomorrow. Or earlier,” answers Hank.

Hank watches the late news. Ming sends a text message.

‘Agree. Half a million. Wait for further instructions. Total crew – four. Expect to spend four days in the woods.’

The next morning Hank drives to the

Grove Valley Cemetery north of Volunteer Park near Lake Union in Seattle. He walks past the front gate, and carries out unscheduled maintenance on an electronic panel at the back of a large LCD Display. It shows the day's funeral services. He checks the gates and is satisfied that they now operate perfectly and screws the panel back on.

He then walks to a crypt half-way up the cemetery. It's inspection time. He looks at the headstone's tiny in-built camera and makes sure the feed comes back on his phone, inserts a key in a Telecom box two feet away, opens it, looks inside and closes it. He walks over to the nearby trash bin and looks inside it. Finally, he squints and fixes his gaze on a camera hidden on the tree trunk opposite, again checking that a reception signal activates as expected on his phone.

He goes back to his van parked outside the gates. The design livery looks professional - 'Cemetery Security and Maintenance.' then jumps in and drives away.

He stops the van and takes a call. It is a distorted voice but Hank knows who is on the line.

"Location Montana. Rapid Springs

Ranch. April 16. Target Rupentine. One week to finish. Initial cash drop one hundred fifty thousand dollars. When is the drop? And where?"

"This Wednesday. Noon exactly. A trash bin in a park. You will get the coordinates for the drop."

HANK CHOMPS ON a hamburger. His Black Ops buddy, Jesse is African American, an MIT tech-savvy graduate with perfect physique and at thirty-eight he is at his peak. Jesse is at the wheel of his vehicle.

He parks the car and both observe the Korean person in his parked Hyundai. They wait for five minutes, then Ming gets out of his car. He looks around cautiously and then reaches inside his car and grabs a package, walks towards the trash bin, drops the package inside the bin, gets back to his car and drives off.

Hank steps out of the car while Jesse takes his car for a run around the block. He walks casually around the park looking at the newspaper killing some time. Jesse is back and indicates to Hank that all is okay prompting Hank to go directly to the trash bin, where he retrieves the package and gets straight back in Jesse's car.

"Jesse, get the rest of The Squad and

we will meet tomorrow night at seven. You have the coordinates. I think we are dealing with the head of a Chinese - North Korean Terrorist Cell."

It is nighttime now. This is true wilderness, heavily wooded and misty. And it happens to be bear country, however, this offers no problem to Hank.

As a matter of fact it is a familiar environment for him. He spends most of his time in his proper day job in the wilderness working for the Wild Life Services protecting fowl, fauna and bears. Alternatively, he could be on a clandestine mission cleaning out enemies of the State.

The Squad consists of Jesse, Aaron - a failed medic but a brilliant fighter and Adam - a bullfighter in his native Mexico. They are all similar in age. They make up The Squad - all ex-Black Ops who served together under Hank. None of them married. Together with three rookies in their twenties, they huddle around a camp fire.

"Okay, guys," says Hank, "do I have your attention? Let's recap. I have already picked up one hundred fifty big ones. Cell phones stay turned OFF and girlfriend talk is OFF until the mission ends."

"Yes, but why are we doing this?" asks

the youngest of the rookies.

"The least you know the better. The Chinese are trying to extract the maximum price for the annihilation they suffered a year ago. They have our very own Royal Family in their sights."

"Where is the drop?" asks Jesse.

"Usual place. You shoot at your target after I myself pull the trigger on mine. You will hear the shot. Before that, we stay here in the wild for the next three days. Jesse and me on this side, Aaron and Adam, both of you on the opposite side."

"Who are we hitting?" asks another rookie.

"Rookies, learn to listen. For the next two days, we visually follow the trails. When the time comes, Jesse, Aaron and Adam will drive to a new location in Seattle. When that happens, you three rookies will replace them."

The next day, the ex-U.S. President and his wife Celine ride together along the horse trail. It looks like the trail has been reserved for the Rupentines' exclusive use for the duration of the vacation. The Secret Service follow them but keep a modest distance.

Hank looks through the scope and

continuously adjusts the cross hairs.

It is now two o'clock in the morning in the wilderness of this Montana high ground. Hank wakes his crew up.

"Wake up guys, it's two. The hit is today at noon. You have nine hours to get there and take up your positions. Take care boys, roads are slippery. Rookies, take position on the opposite side. You, young man, stay with me."

Jesse, Aaron and Adam leave the camp. The rookies take up their positions.

Hank calls Ming. "Ming, twelve today."

Ming replies, "The loot will be at the Drop - one hour before. I have the new co-ordinates. Cash in the trunk of my car, in ten thousand bundles - thirty-five bundles in total. Use your mobile camera. Check the bundles, we wait for your thumbs up and put the cash in the bin. As soon as we hear the shot, we move out. If you don't hit the target, we will take the bundles out again. When will you collect the bundles?"

"That's not your business."

It is nine in the morning. Jesse, Aaron and Adam stop at the Grove Valley Cemetery and check the LCD Board. It displays 'No services today' and 'Closed for maintenance.'

They drive to the other side of the cemetery, park their vehicles in different spots. They keep some distance away from each other and then walk through a back gate which is hardly ever used. It creaks badly. Soon they take up their positions behind the trees.

Just before eleven, two cars appear at the gates, they drive up at a snail pace and park by the trash bin.

The feed from Hank's hidden surveillance camera is active. He gets a panoramic view of what's going on. Ming activates his feed on his own burner phone and points his burner at the trunk of his car which is now open. The bundles are counted and Ming drops the bundles into two large rubbish bags. Hank gives him thumbs up and Ming places them in the trash bin.

So they all wait anxiously. Hank calls Ming again. "Ming, listen, target is coming in sight now. In one minute, you will hear one shot, maybe two. Okay wait... easy... easy... hold on now - ."

Hank turns the burner phone face down, pushes the rifle barrel in the damp ground and pulls the trigger. BANG. It is the safest shot he had ever taken and the biggest prize.

“- He’s down and I’m off and running,” says Hank in a calm and cool voice.

Ming hears the shot, ends the call and gives his Korean partner thumbs up to pull the cash out of the trash bin.

Jesse and Aaron fire their dart guns: SWOOSH, SWOOSH, SWOOSH, each three times. Both Koreans drop to the ground.

Adam closes the gates remotely, runs down, then places ‘Closed for Maintenance’ sign in front of the entrance.

A tent goes up, bodies are dragged under the tent, and the cash is dumped in the Telecom box. The wallets, keys and notebooks are secured. Their burner phones are switched OFF and put away safely.

Crypt slabs go up, bodies go in, slabs go down. Jesse sweeps around the slabs then folds down the tent. No blood, no mess. Aaron replaces the vehicles’ number plates, loads the folded tent in the Korean’s car and drives out of the cemetery. Jesse follows inside the second car.

Adam closes the gates, picks up the maintenance sign, pulls the tent from the

Korean's car, dumps the tent and the sign in the back of his truck and follows Jesse and Aaron.

Jesse and Aaron drive the Koreans' cars to the scrap yard where rows of cars are piled upon each other. Willie Wilson climbs down from the scrapyard crane, gets close to the cars for a quick inspection prior to crushing.

"I was about to close for the day. Any stiffs inside?" asks Willie.

"None," replies Jesse.

"Hank's word is as good as gold. Seven thousand. You can hang around."

Jesse hands him the cash. Willie gets on his scrapyard magnetic claw crane and back to work.

"Priority job, yours is next after the next cube drops. Twenty minutes. Done before it gets dark."

Twenty minutes later two same-sized cubes drop down; job done; Adam drives Jesse and Aaron back to the Cemetery to retrieve their trucks.

EARLY SUNDAY MORNING. Jimmy Calante, late forties, waves as Hank drives in the yard and parks the van straight in the far drive-through shed. Jimmy promptly locks

and secures the gates and deploys his Doberman.

Jimmy hurries into the shed and without delay puts the front shutter down and greet the boys. Jesse, Aaron and Adam jump out of the van. Hank opens the back while he holds a wad of cash and a box of cigars.

"Two bodies, Jimmy. Not cops. Ten big ones and a box of Montecristo's. Have the rum ready for us."

"You're a good man, Hank. All tanks topped up with chemicals. It's all quick and fast in my Macca-Jacca Drive-Thru; you drive in, you pay, consumption is over and done, and drive out."

"The extra strong liquid?"

"All mixed in already. You have your masks and clothing. When finished, open the back shutter up and point her nose out that way and come see me by my RV. Bacardi, rum, cigars and back to the Cuba operation days."

Jimmy lifts the shed's back shutter up and walks out of the shed letting the door drop down with a thud.

The four of them stand at the back of the van, heads bowed for a brief moment of silence. Hank checks all the tanks,

chemicals and other equipment while the other three don their protective clothing.

Hank says a few words to complete the service before the start of this closing chapter. "All has been done for the sake of the Country and the President. Rum and cigars will be waiting for you by Jimmy's RV. Go to work boys. Aaron, lift the shutter please."

Hank drives the van out and parks it by Jimmy's RV. They share drinks and a few tales from the old days.

"Business is always welcome here Hank, I owe a ton of money on my shiny new toy, the first piece of comfort I had in fifty years."

That night, the Squad and the rookies gather over a few beers.

"The mission is not finished yet, the rest of the Korean gang are waiting for Ming's return," says Hank.

Jesse agrees, "We need to flush them out, they are out there right now looking for us."

The Squad decides to use a barebones abandoned shed in Mystic Mountain about 50 miles east of Seattle south of Monroe. It is absolutely virgin woodland. At this stage, they must not let the shed co-

ordinates be known to the enemy. They decide to set up camp for two days.

The plan looks simple enough; they will keep their burners switched on to enable the enemy's hit team to discover their whereabouts. Once their signal is picked up, the Koreans will come looking for them, by then inevitably they will get ambushed by Hank's squad occupying the higher ground.

The drone bird, a creation of Adam's mechanical and electronics ingenuity is ready again to be put to the skies. If need be, they have a couple more drones at the ready equipped with the latest micro surveillance cameras. They could embed them in trees or allow the drones to hop from one tree to the other along the expected route. Following the Koreans all along the trail would require dedicated attention so all the seven boys are on duty.

They set up a camp in the shed with plenty of supplies, fuel, gas, food, all the camping gear and all the firepower they could muster. They all feel safe in Hank's territory but they are all lectured what to do if bears come hunting for food.

The vigil continues for three days when their phone burners start showing signs of

life. The drone bird is deployed along the main route leading to the vicinity of the camp site.

The surveillance cameras show five hitmen travelling in two cars. They are led by Kim Jong-Moon, whose name is supplied by Hank's hacker-friend known simply by his nickname of Burnyard. He gets his label from the scores of burners and phones stacked at the back of his yard, and many more in an easily accessible metal box buried in the ground... easy located only if you know the box's coordinates.

The Koreans stop about 10 miles away from the camp site but are still on the public road. They get out, stretch their legs and then spread their maps on the leading car's hood.

The three rookies are dispatched to track the Koreans as they make their way up. Unless they were engaged the rookies were not to shoot. Hank and the other three stayed at the shed. The rookies continue to track until the enemy is about 3 miles from the shed.

The Koreans stop the vehicles as they could drive no further up the trail. They step out of their cars after feeding the Rottweilers but they keep the dogs locked

inside. The rookies figured that once the remote is pressed and the door goes up, the dogs will be out in a flash.

The lead rookie calls Hank using his private mobile, since 'intel wise' the secret is in the open. It is possible for the North Koreans to eavesdrop on their communications. They have no option but to talk the language of Green Beret cum Seals cum Black Ops in a Midwest accent.

The lead rookie tells Hank they were heavily armed with two rifles each, lots of ammo and grenades and dogs in the car. The window in the car is kept partly open.

"Got a plan" says one of the rookies.

Hank says, "Okay Rookie, make me proud, go for it."

Hank is not naive but he trusts these guys. They are trained and came out from the metaphorically-speaking Hank Harrison Academy, when they served in the military and then in the wilderness of the Seattle Nature Reserves.

The lead rookie approaches the vehicle together with his buddy. The dogs go mad. His buddy seals the gap with heavy duty metallic looking tape. The leading rookie then punctures a little hole in the tape and inserts the nozzle of a canister.

He lets it empty itself completely, then the second canister nozzle is inserted delivering the final dose of lethal gas.

Once empty, both the Rottweilers are fast asleep, but the mission is far from accomplished.

If they were to open the car, the Koreans will get the alarm. They decide to stay there for a further five minutes leaving the third rookie following the trail. Nothing moves inside the car, so they thought they should make their way up the trail and stay within 150 yards from the hitmen.

All the five Koreans spread out in an arc shape but keep close to each other as they make their way up the wooded terrain.

The five of them are now within 300 yards off the shed the drones are set off. After the third low pass the drones themselves become targets. One of them gets hit.

One of the Koreans is seen pressing the car's remote but nothing happens. He thinks the signal is not getting through because of the terrain. He starts running down to let the dogs out.

The lead rookie sees him coming towards him. The spy camera on the

rookie's helmet is transmitting the drama real-time to Hank and crew.

"Hey, where you going pal?" asks the rookie.

The Korean looks stunned, certainly not expecting this. Then *Bang, Bang, Bang*. One down. Four more to go.

Hank sends him a text: *'Good shot buddy. Secure his burner wallet and papers.'*

Country and Western music and party chatter is heard coming out of the shed making it an obvious target. The other four Koreans keep moving and launch a grenade at the shed. It lands 3 feet away and takes most of it out.

Hank and Adam are out amongst the trees on one side, Jesse and Aaron on the opposite side. They let the Koreans approach the burning shed and once in the open, it is End Game. A total of eight shots and four more Koreans drop to the ground.

All personal papers, burners and wallets are taken and put aside including their arms which are confiscated to be handed over to the CIA.

The next gruesome task is to dig a hole and bury the fallen with respect they are

due as the army had taught them when disposing of enemy remains. The experience from the Grove Valley Memorial Cemetery is not lost either except it was a neater job.

With so many hands available, a hole is dug deeper than expected. Certainly not conforming to the dimensions of shallow graves occasionally found in this type of surrounds. Once the bodies are laid in, they make the site look pristine again. They spray chemicals around the periphery of the hole which would stop wild animals from sniffing around. One might say, Hank knew his business well.

Hank figures another \$7000 for Willie Wilson Cube services. Maybe, \$2000 for Cyanide Jim and a new box of Montecristo's.

Burying the dogs in the same hole would have been better, however, Hank had other ways to handle the dead dogs due to the predators' sense of smell of other dead animals.

As usual, Hank is always prepared. He carries pairs of old number plates in his car. They would be swapped before they enter the scrap yard just in case.

Hank calls both yard owners and arranges a time.

As usual, Jimmy answers the phone in a comic way.

"Cyanide Jim here. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"It's Hank."

"Again? How many pairs of legs do you have this time."

"Four pairs."

"That's \$20,000."

"Jimmy, these are two dogs."

"Oh shit, you had me there. I thought my payments on the RV would soon be over. What you want to pay?"

"\$2,000 and a box of Montecristo's."

"You got a deal."

"See you when we get there," replies Hank.

"Oh, what breed?"

"Rottweilers."

"I would have paid you five if you got them here alive."

"Next time," replies Hank.

They drag all the camping gear down the mountain trail and stop by the Koreans' cars.

At the top of his voice, Aaron says, "Oh Fu....."

Hank is quick to add, "Aaron, we're Black Ops. What happened?"

"The keys are packed in the box, six feet down in a hole."

No problem, "We're Black Ops, Special Ops, the whole U.S. military banded together!"

"Elementary." says Jesse.

Once the cars are forced open, they search under the seats and in the glove compartments.

It looks to be a good haul. Just under \$50,000 in cash. That means one extra for Cyanide Jim. Ten is put aside to be given out at the point of service. They split the rest equally between them.

The dogs are moved to a temporary resting place in a metal box welded to the underside of Hank's truck.

All is done and dusted by the end of the week.

"We paid our Country back in services. Rupentine has been spared," declares Hank.

"Now, let's split the loot from the

Cemetery hit. We took five hundred and ten thousand in total. Less expenses. Rookies, you get sixty between the three of you."

"Jesse, Aaron and Adam, two hundred forty for you guys. Eighty for me. Jesse, please take this hundred and ten thousand to the Veterans Association."

One of the rookies says loudly, "that's pretty generous boss."

Hank's quick response. "You've got to give something back to the millions out there whose families are still suffering - and show them respect."

"What happens now?" asks Jesse.

"Mouths shut. Two melted away and we flushed out the other five Koreans, they stay in the ground. That's seven dead. What about the box, Jesse?"

"Arms, cell phones, notes, wallets, keys are now buried and sealed in that box. No fingerprints. These are the coordinates, Hank."

"I will pass these numbers to the CIA. Remember boys, we are outlaws. We acted outside the Line of Command. We got paid well. We killed the enemy but we will need to be rehabilitated and mix in with the rest of the world outside. That's

the next job that I need to tackle.” Then Hank continues.

“I have a two-pronged plan to get us out of this mess and maybe I get myself a wife too. I’m done with Ops. Let’s drink and split.”

Charles V Abela

Chapter 23

Can Rupentine's savior save his own skin?

23

Hank dresses to impress. He wears a false moustache, a wig, and a new Italian suit. He takes a seat at the Sierra Calda Coffee Shop in Lake Tahoe, and taps his fingertips impatiently on the table and waits.

Maria Ramos is sitting two tables away from Hank. She reads the daily news while sipping a coffee.

Hank looks at Maria.

“Do you order inside or here? Does the waiter come for the order?”

“The waiter will come for your order,” answers Maria while giving him a curious look.

Hank stands and waves to the waiter, “One black no sugar please.”

He looks at Maria. "In a bit of a hurry, slow pace here."

"You're not from here?" asks Maria.

"Originally from Texas, now living in Seattle. You may be able to help, and I am here on a very important business; to help the President Frank Rupentine. You're Maria Ramos, do you know him?"

"Very well, how do you know my name?"

"I know many things, but I am a friend. How is Frank now?"

"He's fine, but getting a bit slow," replies Maria.

He takes out an envelope from his jacket pocket. He gently thumps its edge on the table, sniffs it and bends it from one side to the other.

"It is perfectly safe, no bombs in it, no ricin. The President is in grave danger unless he takes action."

Maria's jaw drops; she freezes.

"You need to bypass the Security, if not, my cover will be blown. Soon, you will meet Celine here, pass this to her, it is a matter of life and death."

"An attempt on his life was made a

while ago," says Maria.

"The second happened while on holiday in Rapid Springs Ranch in Montana. Nobody knows about that, not even Frank himself. He was spared."

"You saved him?"

In a non-flattering way Hank acknowledges that he did.

"From me to you, to Celine, to Frank. He'll take it up with the President. Promise me, no time for crying, you're doing great."

Hank puts thirty dollars on the table, then a gentle bow.

"She will be here soon. Can I at least get to know your name?"

"Black Ops," whispers Hank and leaves.

He crosses the road; the security camera mounted on the side of 'Restaurant Carlos' signage has him in its frame.

Celine shows up and takes a seat next to Maria. She motions to the Secret Service to give them space.

"He looks like a polished businessman," says Celine.

Maria smiles and scribbles a note.

Celine reads it and answers, "Negative. No wires on me."

"That man is Black Ops but he is a friend. You and Frank are in some danger. It's all in this letter, pass it to him. *Urgent*, Let's go."

Frank Rupentine, now looking visibly aged, is watching TV when Celine walks in letter in hand.

"From Maria Ramos. Handed to her by a tall mysterious man. He says, it is top secret and you need to know."

Frank reads it slowly and his jaw drops.

"Almost assassinated on holiday. Who is this guy who saved us, he took out seven of them. Have you heard from Jordi? He could be in trouble. Make a copy of this, Celine."

He contemplates what could have happened and what's in store. He sends the letter electronically on his secure link to President Ferraro and gets an almost instantaneous reply.

"Second attempt in two months! CIA are on it in Stockholm. We will relocate Jordi, your security is trebled; who is this mysterious man?"

"He is in hiding and acted outside the

line of command. Presidential Pardon?”

“I will do that, Frank. He deserves a Medal. I bet he is a Black Ops guy. The new Russian President, Nikita Ivanov is in similar trouble, there was an attempt on his life two weeks ago. Bye for now.”

Hank is watching the early morning CNN news. He does not look surprised, but certainly elated and turns the volume up.

“... a second attempt on the life of Frank Rupentine has been foiled. It is rumored that a Black Ops mission – a band of seven and operating outside the line of command, thwarted the plot. Walter Ferraro has issued pardons for the leader and his crew of six. At this stage they identify themselves as Mag Seven...”

He switches off the TV and makes a call to his office at the Seattle Wild Life.

“Connie, Wild Life. Hello, Hank.”

“Hi Connie, tell the boss I won’t be in today. Not feeling too good. And look after yourself. Bye.”

“Hank, hold on, is that all you got for me. I haven’t talked to you for days. At least, ask me how I am feeling.”

“How are you feeling Connie?”

Remember I love you.”

“You’re one of a kind Hank, take care, we all love you.”

He pours himself a whiskey. A broad smile lights up his face.

Five days later, Maria Ramos sits at the table next to her son Carlito. He is thirteen years old, tall for his age and well-behaved. They wait for their drinks. From the corner of her eye, she sees a shadow behind her and looks up. It is Hank.

“Well stranger, please sit down.”

“Nice young boy, your son?” asks Hank.

“Carlito, say hello to the gentleman.”

“Hank... Hank Harrison.”

“Hello Mr. Harrison.”

“I noticed you behave yourself well.”

Carlito nods politely. Maria motions him to give them room.

“He can stay, it involves Carlito too.”

She opens her bag, takes out a folded piece of newspaper and opens it flat on the table.

“It’s been in my bag since published. Presidential pardon after saving Frank

Rupentine's life. It is big news."

"I was living in the shadows and in hiding. Now, I'm a free man, thanks to you, that pardon would not have been possible without your help."

"I kept waiting for the phone to ring," answers Maria.

"I fully understand, this is very personal. I visit the local church to feel close to my favorite saint, at times, I have to wait for days for the sun to shine through the stained glass."

He pauses.

"When the light shines through, it uncovers the secret that lies behind that great art, the shade on his face and the sparkle in his eyes. Even the shadows bring out the suffering endured and the hope that overcomes it, then it all comes to life."

"This favorite saint of yours is...?" asks Maria.

"St. Jude, patron saint of hope."

"He is one of the twelve apostles," adds Carlito.

Hank looks at Carlito with an understanding smile. Then he looks at Maria, puts his hand on hers. There is

silence. She takes another sip of coffee and almost chokes on it. She looks at Carlito, his eyes seem to indicate approval.

"I... I was not expecting this. I don't know what to say."

"Just say 'Yes,'" says Hank.

She looks again at Carlito. This time Carlito nods emphatically, then she waits for Hank to continue.

"I will be a good father to Carlito. I will look after him like I would after my own son. We will go horse-riding together. I will teach him to be a good citizen."

Carlito's face now lights up.

"You mean, on real big horses?"

"On our ranch in Montana; three horses, cows and bison."

"Let me guess. Twenty cows and ten bison."

"A few more Carlito, two hundred cows and twenty bison. Chicken and pigs."

"Wow, I like that."

"Maria, it was a surprise, I know, but I have your number and I promise I will call you. Till next time, you'll be good Carlito... good man."

He stands up, pats Carlito on the head and leaves.

"Mom, I like Hank. You will be happy, I want to go to Montana, I want to be like him when I grow up." Maria looks at Carlito with tears in her eyes.

HANK PUTS THE dome lights on, takes the LP out of its cover and looks closely at both sides. He smiles, puts it back and turns his interior lights off. His cell rings.

"Hi Jesse, long time no see."

"Where are you? What are you up to?"

"I was gonna drive home and listen to my new LP, then to Betty's Diner."

"How about we meet there, have a beer and some grub, I got Kenny Rogers on, can't beat country music, see you in ten?"

"Sounds good, better get moving."

Betty serves beer behind the bar as Hank and Jesse walk in.

"The military boys are here; been a while Jesse. Beer?"

"What else is there!"

"Two beers coming up. Hank, not so sure if you sound happy or not?"

Hank smiles at Betty and takes his

usual seat. Jesse sits opposite.

"Quick arm wrestle, Hank."

"Okay, thumb to thumb, push, grab, go."

Betty walks to the table with two large beers and she patiently watches.

"I'm glad you boys finally having some fun. But I am getting tired holding these two slops. C'mon Jesse, move your ass for this young chick. So how have you been guys? Hank, I got a feeling something's bothering you."

"I'm fine, Jess is fine."

"That's good. You know this caper about a hit on the President. Am I unmasking the Zorro twins. That would be a great movie, come on boys, you're free men now, you can tell me, hey I could be your agent."

Hank looks at Jesse, then at Betty.

"Remember that Korean guy a few weeks back? The guy with the parcel."

"Yeah. What about him? Where is he?"

"Dead."

"Don't tell me no more, I'm scared of those people, you never know what they're up to. Uh... was it... just the one?"

"And all children go to heaven," says Jesse.

"Oh my God. Seven?"

"But not in heaven," adds Hank.

A young waitress approaches with the food.

"You bought an LP Hank, can I look?"

"What you suggested a while back."

"That was a few months' back. Let me have a peep. I'll be fucked! Don't fight over me boys, happily married."

"I won't, Betty!" says Hank.

"Hank Williams Love Sick Blues. Still no girl of your own? Get cracking, get married and have kids, seriously, both of you, it will change your lives."

"Kids, I got more than I can poke the fingers of my right hand at. I lost Tim and Maya when I divorced. I loved those kids. I proposed to a young woman, thirty-two, divorced, beautiful son. I could be a good father to him, but I don't know, if she says yes, we can have one of our own."

"That leaves one," says Jesse.

"That's on the way," replies Hank.

"On the way? Who, what, when?" asks

Betty.

"My psychiatrist. She was supposed to help me with my problems."

"Can't keep a Black Ops guy away. Hank, my simple advice, work on the newly found love. I better go, it's getting busy, the food is on me."

"What's happening on your side, Jess?" asks Hank.

"I just don't know how to handle them."

"With care, Jess. I am fucking torn inside. Don't know which way to jump. I want to be happy and settling down with a family is the only way to do it. Getting there is the problem. The military never taught us that. Let's go, I'll leave two hundred for Betty."

A few days went by and Hank decides to drive to Lake Tahoe with a little mission in mind. He looks at his car now parked some distance away from the entrance of 'Restaurant Carlos.' He adjusts his wig and false moustache, walks to the restaurant owner Carlos Mendez who is in his sixties. He shakes hands with Hank and points to the camera.

"Your card came in handy; the security camera has been playing up a bit."

"No worries, Mr. Mendez. Should be straight forward. I'll reposition it slightly to give it more protection and replace a seal, I have the parts. Should be about thirty minutes."

Hank gets up the ladder and unscrews the device from the wall, moves it by a few inches and proceeds to install his own surveillance. He then unscrambles the transmissions and all is good.

"How's it going?"

"It just about ready now. It will be \$80 in cash if you don't mind. Saves \$20 worth of paperwork. You call me anytime if you have further problems. So long."

One week later, Hank parks about two hundred yards from the 'Sierra Calda Coffee Shop'. He takes out his iPad from the glove compartment and switches it on. A clandestine direct feed from the surveillance camera outside 'Restaurant Carlos' shows Maria coming for her morning coffee at around ten. Carlito is with her and works his iPhone. Hank decides to give her a call and observes how she reacts.

"Hi, Hank. I was thinking of calling you. I will be honest, I was hoping you drop by today or tomorrow. I know it's a long trip though."

“As it happens, I am close by, it’s a short walk.”

“You’re kidding me? I see you soon at the usual place.”

He watches her as she gives the good news to Carlito who looks equally excited. Hank puts the iPad back in the glove compartment and like a little kid, he rubs his hands with glee. He steps out of the car and starts walking towards the coffee shop.

“Hello Maria; hello Carlito.”

“Carlito wants to be macho like you. Hey buddy, I would like to talk to Hank in private. Ten minutes?”

“Have you considered it?” asks Hank.

“The problem is Carlito. He likes you heaps and that’s my fear.”

“I understand how you feel. I cannot change my past; I am proud of what I had to do to save many lives. Maybe thousands could have died. Some punch, some get punched, some get killed, some have to kill.”

“He’s... a little kid. They just follow their heroes.”

“My professional work imposes restrictions. As I put the shutters down on

my career, I visualize Carlito being a doctor or a lawyer.”

“So what do you do now for a living?”

“Easy job with the Seattle Wild Life Department. Out in the wilderness looking after fowl, fauna and bears.”

“And on your Montana Ranch?”

“Part farming and part employment with the local Wild Life Authorities.”

His cell buzzes gently.

“Hank, it’s Connie. They think you went AWOL here. You’re okay? With no boss, I know you walk in and out, but... are we gonna see you again?”

“I have some family matters I am sorting out right now in Lake Tahoe and will be there after tomorrow, in the meantime...”

“... In the meantime, what?”

“Keep the bears away.”

Connie chuckles.

“Hank, you’re something. See you soon and take care.”

“I chase the bears. They chase me. I chase you. That’s how it goes.”

“You’re funny, Hank, hey, Carlito.”

Carlito comes running and sits next to his mom. She looks at Carlito, tears in her eyes. Then she looks at Hank.

She places her hand on Hank's.

"I accept."

Carlito leaps out of his chair straight into Hank's arms who hugs him like one of his own. Then Hank reaches inside his pocket.

"I like to keep things simple. Let me have your hand."

"Beautiful ring. I am lost for words."

"Celine said to me that Frank is waiting to meet his knight in armor. They suggest a private ceremony at their house."

"Let's do it. Two weeks' time?" asks Hank.

"I'll leave now to give Celine the good news. I read the latest news on what's happening in Russia ... similar to Frank's. You're not involved, are you? Promise me you won't discuss what's happened."

They kiss, then Hank walks back to his car.

Two weeks later they all gather at the Rupentines' for the big occasion.

Hank and Maria stand next to each

other while the priest conducts a very brief wedding ceremony.

They look in each other's eyes. In attendance are Carlito, Frank Rupentine and Celine. The priest concludes the ceremony with the Lord's blessings and a sprinkling of Holy Water.

"... I pronounce you, man and wife. Hank, you may kiss the bride."

The ceremony is now over and Frank Rupentine makes his move... "Hank, I am absolutely delighted to finally meet my savior, your wonderful wife Maria and your son Carlito. May all of you find the happiness that you deserve."

He stands up with difficulty, then lets his cane drop to the floor. He hugs Hank seemingly holding on to him.

"I don't know what to say, Sir."

Walter Ferraro suddenly appears on the TV via a secure link.

"Hi Hank, Frank and everybody. I want to say how wonderful it is to meet you on such a great occasion. The First Lady and I wish you, Hank and Maria all the happiness. I would like to invite you, Maria and Carlito to the White House at your earliest opportunity. Also we wish the best for Frank and Celine. God bless."

Chapter 24

Nature deals Rupentine a cruel hand.

24

The Governor of Nevada, Roy Stennings heads the low-key Ceremony attended by a very large local crowd. He unveils the monument and walks towards the mike.

“... and now, with great love and affection we honor our dear President, our own local hero from Nevada, Mr. Frank Rupentine.”

Rupentine sips water and walks slowly to the mike using his cane for support. “I approached the war with a heavy heart. I prayed to God for an hour before I took that step. The prayer is engraved in this stone behind me and helps you to understand the reasons for my actions. I hope it sheds light on the pain and

suffering endured by the people of our Country, those in China and North Korea, our Armed Forces and by all those who gave their lives in the line of duty. Thank you all for coming.”

A lady in the gathering asks. “‘Lest we Forget’. I never heard that before.”

“That is an Australian phrase. A most appropriate reminder. It means ‘Not to Forget’ which is a lesson for all. It’s commonly used in Australia where my love for Climate Change was born.”

Rupentine works on his autobiography in his Lake Tahoe home. It is getting a bit late in the evening. He picks up the phone. It is Walter Ferraro.

“Hi Frank. What’s happening?”

“I am working on my last chapter and a one-page montage for my autobiography – ‘My journey through history’. The montage is easy, but the chapter itself ... I keep skipping it, Walter. It has so much truth in it and reflects my deep inner thoughts. It troubles me a lot to reveal it the way it should be revealed, in totality. But I am going to be pragmatic about it.”

“What is it called?”

“The Rape of Europe,” answers Rupentine.

"A very sensitive subject, and I think I understand."

"Hopefully I will finish it in a few days' time."

"About time, Frank. Rumor has it that you have been nominated for the Nobel Prize. Leave space for one more picture in your montage."

"I'm honored. I owe that to you."

"Not at all Frank, you earned it all. But on that chapter, 'The Rape of Europe', I am getting some mixed feelings. You don't want to hurt your popularity or Legacy. The truth often offends. But again what you have to say could influence generations to come. As usual Frank, you're in full control. Do it your way."

"You know Walter, you're right, I am a bit like Sinatra. I think they played that CD on my way from the Middle East or London, cannot remember now. The captain said he had it in his cockpit, did you give it to him, either you or Celine did... now wait a minute, I think it was you. Sinatra is not Celine's favorite."

"I did pass the CD it to the pilot of Air Force Two. He played it on your way from Chequers, London. I thought it was a nice tribute as to who you really are."

"Am I getting it wrong Walter, was it One or Two?"

"It was Air Force Two, Frank. You had already spent eight years flying on Air Force One. It was time you gave me a break. Ha, ha."

"That's right yes ... yes ..."

"Frank? Frank? Oh you're there, as I said, with this chapter you just do it your way as usual. Let the truth as you see it be known, after all, you do carry a lot of punch."

"Thank you, Mr. President, any time call me and I will help if I can, although I am weakening."

"Xiang Xing Ping... not sure about him. What do make of him, Frank?"

"... Not much. Not many think a lot of him. I don't like to label people but Ping is a SOB. He is under your hammer. Keep him there. Nikita Ivanov may even feel threatened. He probably would need somebody like Hank to do the job."

"That did cross my mind, Frank. I let you rest. Good bye." Frank ends the call.

Celine sits next to Frank with a worrying look on her face.

"Here's to us. Best Red in Nevada."

Rumor has it, I'm in for a Nobel."

"Celine, with regards to that chapter, I have finished it - but I keep editing it. I am running round in circles. I change words here, there and everywhere, delete them, underline them, the same with phrases. Sometimes, I delete whole paragraphs, not because the content is untrue, but because it would open old wounds and that is certainly not my intention. Maybe I am still the same old Frank that I was before Milton started me on the bipolar treatment."

Celine interjected, "Yes darling, I still remember Milton's words, 'Severe bipolar disorder. He has always been concerned between doing what is right, what appears to be right, avoids what is wrong and what appears to be wrong,' meaning you cannot please them all at the same time. Good old Milton, he described you so well."

They both look at each other. Then she continues, "in all honesty, I prefer you the way you are, because you are genuine, honest and always trying to do the right thing. It is nearly ten o'clock now. I suggest you call it a day and continue your writing and editing in the morning."

"Good night, darling."

CARRYING A CANE to steady his walk and increasingly becoming reliant on it for ease of mobility was a clear sign that horse-riding should have ceased to be on his agenda.

It was a newly-discovered pastime for Frank shortly after he left office. But that was two years ago and a few falls later. His autobiography had kept him away from riding and so he had lost many of the required skills and agility. Irrespective, they decide on a short horse-riding holiday around Las Vegas, in itself a gamble, due to the difficulty of this particular ride.

It means spending time on horseback in terrain with notoriously difficult uneven ground. They enjoy their ride along a narrow gulley when suddenly the weather turns nasty. A bolt of lightning makes the horses rear and both are thrown off and hit the ground hard. Rupentine lies motionless and is immediately swarmed by the secret service as well as the horse-trainers who were accompanying them. An air ambulance arrives on the scene and whisks Frank and Celine to the Sunrise Hospital & Medical Center.

The NIFAI Monitoring Center got a whiff of the accident and immediately

dispatches its own Agents. They fly out from their base in Las Vegas to the hospital. They run through the hospital corridors flashing their badges while making their way to the operating theater. Apart from a genuine concern for the ex-president, their main objective is to take possession of the A.I. ArmBand that Rupentine still insisted on wearing. They unwrap it from around his arm and soon afterwards he is stretchered off to a waiting air ambulance.

It lifts off from the Last Vegas hospital helipad and flies in a north westerly direction.

It lands on the Gerlach airstrip. Frank is transferred from the helicopter into the NIFAI ambulance which drives off and soon disappears in the desert haze and then, underground.

It arrives at the NIFAI Surgical Unit whereupon the Medical Staff take the patient out of the ambulance and rush him inside the building. He is back in the Operating Theater surrounded by familiar medical staff headed by Dr. Koch and Dr. Meredith. They all stand next to the semi-conscious Rupentine as he is laid on the operating table.

It takes Frank Rupentine a few days

until he is well enough to be sent home to continue his slow recovery in Lake Tahoe. He is now visibly ailing and is constantly being attended to by medical assistants. They help him in and out of the wheelchair and perform other simple tasks since Celine is no longer strong enough to cope.

Chapter 25

Lamenting The Rape of Europe.

25

CELINE GETS OUT of bed and makes her way to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. She notices that Frank is already sitting down, hunched over his keyboard working hard on his autobiography. However, in the last few days, he seems to be spending more time staring at the keyboard with both hands resting on his lap and at times even dangling at his sides while he sits slouched in his chair.

“You couldn’t sleep again, Frank? Take it a bit easy. What time did you get up?”

“Around six.”

“Let me get you a coffee. Breakfast will be ready soon.”

At breakfast, Frank is lost in thought, miles away, either staring at the window

or at his plate seemingly with a complete loss of appetite.

"Which part of your biography are you in?"

"I am stuck on this chapter. Huh, I keep losing track."

"Why is that?" asks Celine.

"The minute I get a new thought in my head or a new line, I lose it just as quickly, then my mind goes blank or all over the place trying to figure out where the hell I was. It is becoming very frustrating."

"By now, I read you like a book Frank, what would you like me to do to help you out? Read, maybe type and fix the text as we go along, tell me, darling."

"That would be nice, all of the things you mentioned if you don't mind, is it too much, Honey?" asks Frank.

"Never too much."

"I have to warn you though, this chapter does ramble on. It is soothing to the lovers of history who love to listen to a litany of truth. But even to some of these folks it could sound like heavy rock music and could easily put them to sleep or give them nightmares. For this and only this reason, in the end, I might decide to axe

the whole chapter altogether, but that would leave my biography like an Unfinished Symphony."

"Let's finish breakfast and we'll go over this chapter and then you can relax ... and don't invent anything else after that. But first, you must eat some breakfast."

He eats a couple of spoonfuls of cereal, a bite of toast, sips some coffee and urges Celine to start.

"HERE WE GO...The Rape of Europe..."

"Celine, hold it for a minute please. Correction, insert the word 'Reflections' in the title - 'Reflections, dash, The Rape of Europe', make sure that the word rape is typed with a capital 'R.'"

"Does it matter?"

"I wouldn't say it if it didn't, Honey, but I will explain."

"I would like to add the word 'Reflection' because it makes the reader feel that a less judgemental approach had been taken by the writer. As you will see, the content is very sensitive. Why do I insist on a capital 'R'? Well, we are describing a series of events in history that have been happening over a few years. It must be given a proper name; the act is the name and the name is the act. It

brings out its importance as opposed to discussing rape in general, and believe me, that subject is equally important.”

“Okay Mr. President, Professor of Literature.”

“Correction Celine, history.”

“Okay. Noted and corrections made. Here we go, again.”

‘SIX MONTHS AFTER the signing of the Accord at Chequers in January 2034, I could see clear progress being made in the Middle East.’

‘As I continue to work on my autobiography, I can’t help but notice and reflect on the progress of the Peace Accord. I am thrilled to bits to see history changing so dramatically in my own lifetime. Particularly, since as the President of this great Nation, I played a significant part in giving momentum to this new movement after setting it in motion.’

‘I turned my back on many talk shows on a number of TV Networks from coast to coast and overseas. It seemed everybody wanted a piece of me. The public craved to know who I really was, what made me tick, my true personality and my character. As if not enough had already

been said, written and revealed during my eight years in Office.'

'But I would rather spend time reflecting and observing with complete detachment from any sense of grandeur - a euphoric feeling which I surely would have felt facing cameras projecting myself to world audiences.'

'So, I preferred to put it to paper, and be judged purely on the written word rather than the spoken word. The latter would have been subjected to endless conjectures and discussions often meaningless of what I really meant when I said this, that or the other; how I said it, my tone and my body language - the list would go on and on, providing nothing but entertainment.'

'The enormity of the problem was such, that at times in my writing, I had to overemphasise the point to drum the message home but at no time did I mean to exaggerate any of the issues.'

'Before I get to the core of the problem, a few lines about the aftermath of the war would be very appropriate.'

'In reality, my notoriety had come about by taking the colossus China out of the equation. I don't want to sound

uncharitable in my words, but it is the best way I can describe it at this stage.'

"Stop for a minute Celine, the words -- 'out of the equation' -- bother me. They certainly do not make me sound as if I am magnanimous in victory. My ever-present bipolar problem is evident; always caring too much about what other people think of me. Can you think of a better way of re-writing that sentence?"

"Difficult, because that's what it was, it doesn't matter how you cut it. How about 'taking them out?'"

"No, that's even worse. Too jingoistic."

"Make them irrelevant?"

"No."

"Degraded their prowess?"

"No, in reality it is more than that."

"Maybe you should call Wendell."

"Who is Wendell?"

"Your advertising hero, the one who gave you the Shalom-Salaam line."

"Uh... yes, I remember now, he works with Jeremiah, or is it Walter, no, it's not Walter, that's it, Kraut, Helmut Kraut."

“Almost, it is Herman Kraut not Helmut and he introduced Wendell to you.”

“I am all confused Celine, you continue with other ideas, but first make me a coffee. I remember, I must not interfere in your kitchen. Not even the president is allowed in your sacred space. I recall you told us that in the meeting when I wanted those Middle East maps urgently; yeah, Wendell was here on that day. That guy is a true and proper guru in as much as I never liked his ilk.”

Celine gets up to prepare coffee and brownies and Frank takes the opportunity of a silent few minutes and drops off to sleep.

Dr. Meredith had prescribed a mild tablet for Frank to take when he feels tired but needs to stay focused. She drops one such tablet in his coffee, gives it a stir but decides to let Frank rest for a few more minutes.

“Here you go Frank, coffee and brownies.”

“Thank you darling, I must have dropped off. You have the new words as yet.”

“How about if you re-phrase that paragraph like this ... ‘In reality, my

notoriety had come about by making sure that the power of China would be diminished sufficiently enough not to be used to threaten the United States for a long time to come' - and you can leave the uncharitable piece of the paragraph out, because now your language is that of Ghandhi himself, indeed the same measured balanced words often chosen by Mr. Mandela."

"I think you mean President Obama, 'Words Matter,' darling," says Frank.

"No, his famous original line is 'Yes we can.' 'Words Matter,' I think it was MLK's, I may be wrong though. Anyway, let's get back to your line."

"You are a really wise woman, Celine. You would make an excellent VP. So, you don't need to call Wendell after all."

"Good sense of humor Frank, let's continue from where we left."

'In reality, my notoriety had come about by making sure that the power of China will be diminished sufficiently enough not to be used to threaten the United States for a long time to come. This satisfied many countries and millions of people who felt helpless and threatened by China's constant march forward. On a number of occasions, my leadership style

and human kindness were opaqued by the facade presented in achieving the above goals.'

'Many would have thought that greed, hatred, vengeance or other despicable character traits would have been the main motivators, yet those presumptions couldn't have been further removed from the truth.'

'It was not China's fault. China was offered these so-called rewards on a platter and they eagerly took them, gobbled them, digested them and came for more. And then they were handed even more so they kept coming. As it happens with 1.5 billion people, this is a nation with a huge appetite.'

'I am not writing this to shame anybody, any Nation, or to apportion blame, but responsibility has to be identified so as it could serve a better service in the future. The Western World, being the U.S. and Europe but in particular, the latter, were both riding high on their ideals of being the world's foremost benefactors and very proud of that too. And true, that is something that one ought to be proud of. Yet, in Europe, we have a continent that appeared extremely naive.'

‘In the U.S., the effect was not immediately apparent due to its superpower structure, its institutions and a harder line of politics.’

‘However, gradually, this Nation was being exposed and becoming the victim of the extreme Left pushing their own far left agenda and ideals in Congress. Lobbying groups must also take part of the blame if not most of it, as well as their de-facto partners, corrupt politicians.’

‘Similarly, blame would have to be apportioned to unscrupulous greedy businesses most of them large corporations. Their sole objective was to maximize a bottomless bottom-line. Large and small corporations even provided their inner boardroom sancta as fertile grounds for the breeding and establishment of deep-states, language of whose we do not understand. These abuses continued to flourish and are still in existence even as I put these lines together.’

‘Uncontrolled migration on either side of the Atlantic offered millions of overseas young people degrees, some genuine, many fake. A considerable number of these students from a handful of countries eventually settled in their new home.

Some, through their newly-established powerbases within their communities plotted and dented the standing of their host countries in the League of Power.'

'As bad as it looks and it really does, our Nation and Europe were also the beneficiaries in acquiring an enormous expanse of above-board brain power. That happened across the Western World.'

'Overall, the idea was good, it was legal, it was genuine but it was badly executed.'

'It needs courage, resolution and bravery to put all this to paper. But this material has to be incorporated in this autobiography, if nothing else other than to wake the Western World from its slumber.'

'As I was writing this biography, my thoughts continued to wander even more deeply on what led to the ultimate demise of China, and how wars develop as a result of greedy and imperialistic behavior. Most importantly, what lessons can be learned from all of this? Speaking silently but not less loudly on paper, I doubted if I ever would have enough courage to include these tormenting thoughts in my memoirs, with sufficient clarity and sense of purpose.'

‘During the three years following the war, things got back to the New Normal.’

“Stop Celine, cancel the next two paragraphs and copy them on a different disk. They are too sensitive for the average mortal; they will be misinterpreted on purpose. These lines will feature in my other special memoirs,” says Frank.

“What do you mean, another book?” asks Celine.

“Yes, I started on it, it’s called ‘Rupentine – Reflections on my Innermost Thoughts.’ Only for Heads of State and only if they request it. An extremely limited edition and personally autographed.”

‘Dismantling of the missiles from the Nuclear Submarines capable of SLBMs was proceeding smoothly. A number of Chinese and North Korean scientists are required to do the job on the dismantling sites carrying out this dangerous and laborious task of rendering them safe under American supervision.’

‘The Chinese submarines are now clogging many of their naval ports, likewise destroyers which were safely anchored in a permanently parked position as if on a long lonely holiday - .’

“Stop Celine, cancel -- ‘as if on a long lonely holiday’ -- It is not necessary.”

“Done, let’s continue.”

‘China is prevented from arming for at least 20 years, by which time the fleet would be severely hampered by the absence of maintenance. It would be destined to end up in new naval rust bucket graveyards spread across their ports. Rebuilding would be the only option then.’

‘The shipyards have ceased functioning for the same reason. Many have been turned into manufacturing facilities for badly-needed farm equipment and the production of goods for peaceful purposes, albeit under severe export licences.’

‘Military satellites had been decommissioned and put out of service. All the low-orbiting ones, with similar applications could not be serviced and thus destined to become unusable and in many instances they will literally melt away. The ones in high orbit, were destroyed by a few Chinese ASAT Systems still functioning at that point in time, the process of which was closely monitored and studied by the U.S. It gave the U.S. military a perfect platform, enabling them

to observe the effectiveness of such a high-tech precision military undertaking.'

'Even to this date many spontaneous riots are being reported from the ...'

"Cancel the rest of this paragraph. It would inflame situations. Then continue after that, please."

It is obvious from looking at Celine's face that she is under a certain amount of strain, but she plods on with the recitation.

'As expected, China always looks inwards to the needs of its vast population. A dreadful thought if they were to open the flood gates. Grand adventures overseas were now a thing of the past. The Belt and Road ...'

"Stop, stop. Cancel the rest of this paragraph, it will instill lots of unnecessary anger in their communities."

'FINALLY, GOVERNMENTS IN Europe woke up to the new reality. They took the initiative and applied the lessons learned even before the start of the war. They realized they had put their very own European Nations into Early Retirement.'

"Early Retirement - capital E and capital R?" asks Celine.

“Yes, it’s an important fact in our history. They stay as they are, in caps.”

‘The greed of a few, albeit very influential politicians, both in Europe and in the U.S., confined substantial numbers of their constituents to a mere sedentary observer status.’

‘In days gone by, the older folk spent their limited and often numbered days enjoying their grandchildren. Many of whom would eventually become renowned engineers, doctors, physicists or would have excelled in creating pieces of art or music all across Europe. That was in their blood then, but now, that blood has been thinned down considerably. In some areas it was becoming quickly a thing of the past.’

“‘In contrast, ...’”

“Stop please, add the words ‘culturally-speaking’ in the previous sentence and read it back to me. I am such a pain... yeah words matter!”

“This is how it reads now...”

‘That was in their blood then - culturally speaking - but now, that blood has been thinned down considerably and, in some areas, it was quickly becoming a thing of the past.’

‘In contrast, these old folk were now relegated to admire their grandchildren from a distance so to speak - often negated of affection and respect that was due to them. The kids’ time now is taken up and devoted to shiny little objects called digital devices where they could literally spend hours tapping ...’

“Cancel this paragraph, in a way it is an attack on technology, correction, *overused and abused technology*, but it strikes at the heart of our nation too. It will only offend. It’s up to the government of the day to show some grit and legislate innovatively to tackle this problem. It is also up to the parents and education authorities to supervise. In our democracy this is an *incalculable* problem and I dare say it’s a subtle subversive weapon being used by our enemies. I have more on this subject in the other memoirs.”

“Honey, you suddenly came to life again emphatically pronouncing certain words with vigor I have to say. Have they switched on your Chip again?”

“No comment, Celine.”

“Oh Frank, that’s so unlike you.”

‘Call it progress. Nobody opposes progress. Just the excess - a combination of Western high-tech greed and cheap

labour encouraged armies of kids tagging at their mum's hard-earned savings and in many instances taking them to the cleaners. Often, the real and true reason given is peer pressure at school, but of late, it has just become the accepted norm given as an answer. It is a fight many parents seemed to have given up on tackling while they are busy trying to make ends meet.'

'Due to political correctness, even the simplest minds would never dare discuss these realities that contributed to this overall demise. Ah, political correctness... indeed, another taboo which added to other root causes of the war - the old shaming game.'

'In certain countries in Europe, the sedentary observers, the older folk, the pensioners and society's left-overs were treated like feeble semi-comatose geriatrics. At this stage of their lives, many would normally pass their leisure time enjoying quiet evenings leaning out of their balconies watching their local world while whispering appropriate and fitting comments. It was the world they grew up in, seeing it going around with the same repetitive monotony as they knew it over the last eight decades. It is this monotony, the enjoyment of which

they have missed during the last thirty years or so.'

'Others would sit outside by their doorstep, a healthy number of them on rickety old chairs well-past their used-by date some of which could be classified as museum items. They spend their evenings talking to their next-door neighbours Maria, Carmena, Gina, et al. Maybe they chat with Giuseppe from across the road or the priest from the local church while on his round busy with small collections to go towards the village *fiesta*. Or run a few doors down to check on their sons, daughters and grandchildren.'

'But now, they seem to spend their time looking at hundreds of visitors doing a *passeggiata* or a *tour à pied* exchanging smiles and listening to their *bongiornos* or *bonjours*.'

'It might have been an innovation twenty years ago but now, frankly speaking, spending three hours of their supposed leisure time acknowledging and returning a thousand of these greetings is a perfect way to wreck their evenings further - and it seems to happen on a daily basis - doomed to last beyond their years. Others who are more mobile

trundle their way through streams of affluent visitors, called tourists ...'

"Cancel the rest, it's too long and it's gone beyond the point of making a constructive critique. Also, cancel the next three paragraphs until you come across the words -- 'Covid - a name more plausible to the ear.' -- oh, don't delete those paragraphs though, save them for my new Reflections book."

"Do you want me to cancel also two paragraphs which I have just read?"

"No, no leave them in, I have to have a way of venting my feelings to an extent ... that's my bipolar condition pointing south in bad weather. Okay, continue please."

'Also acquired was the cream of European engineering blueprints in the form of manufacturing rights, shared engineering know-how, hard copies, hard drives and USB's.'

'From Modena to Frankfurt to Bristol, these master blueprints for hardware and engineering components of luxury vehicles, aircraft and high-speed systems like the *Train à Grande Vitesse* were soon to be found being analysed under the microscope. Next to them, the actual parts disassembled and reverse engineered in the factories in Guangzhou

and Beijing and repeated in in many communist-owned industrial centers.'

'Then, an export drive would follow by flooding the European and U.S. markets with clones of these mechanical wonders sold at half price frequently labeled and branded with half-Asian, half-European names in many instances, but mostly Italian - any name which sounded more melodious or familiar to musical European ears. Or names lifted from the music sheets belonging to the land of Pavarotti.'

'There is no copyright on marketing ideas. This conviction is certainly one which has served friends, allies and adversaries well when selling high-ticket items - fake or real. And sold at half-price to satisfy the demand of the fashionable-conscious achievers in Europe. Included in this mix is a horde of gullible show-offs who spent their formative years tapping on digital phones, sipping coffees and appearing affluent and at times with riches obtained by dubious means.'

'The unfortunate irony is that after a few years, the harvesting of European and U.S. blueprints, software and scientific data would become a thing of the past. Erased from the minds of most and

certainly would have never made landfall in the minds of the young.'

'TIME HEALS, BUT does it? If it really did, the war of January 7th, 2031 would not have taken place.'

'Precious pieces of art that graced European museums, imperial relics of the past, have now been returned to their rightful owners. It was Europe's turn then, to plunder their fellow neighbors and others far away across the oceans. Mostly, it resembled *precious* pieces moved across a chessboard called Europe. They were moved across countries finally to find their original home with their rightful owners - that's the old Imperialistic history.'

'More exchanges are still to come. You look at The Sphinx. Even now this part human, part animal and part eagle is still seen with its claws readied and waiting to repossess many of the old artefacts. The punishment, if ever there was one, was mere embarrassment.'

Making a billion cars disappear and likewise trillions of dollars that now cannot be traced is a different thing though. Hence, the different action, call it, the punishment that ensued.'

“Hold it, change the word ‘punishment’ to ‘action’ please,” interrupts Frank again with a last-minute correction.

‘Imitating their grown-up family members and friends, kids from all educational backgrounds, poor and well-off were wasting their time on similar toys learning to spell and exchanging emojis for fun.’

‘Once the backbone of European Culture, whatever happened to our young would-be, could-be Mozarts, Beethovens and Chopins? Good God, next thing we will have Verdi’s La Traviata in Mandarin performed at the La Scala.’

“Celine, let me stop you there for a short while, at this stage while I was writing, I remember I switched off for a minute. I got up and poured myself a double whiskey. I put my thoughts aside for a fleeting moment and tried to concentrate on my next game of golf, just to take the pressure that I felt while writing this piece. It was of no use. These thoughts were wearing heavily on my mind.”

“There is still more to read Frank, but do continue,” says Celine.

“I concluded that we do have some real serious problems in Europe and North

America. What somebody called 'Clear and Present Danger.' If my memory serves me right, it was the name of a movie or a book."

"At this stage, do you need to get off the subject of listening to this chapter, 'Reflections - The Rape of Europe'?" asks Celine exasperated.

"Yes, yes we do. We should take the initiative while we have the upper hand. But that's up to the parents to fire up their kids. The old adage, 'Charity begins at home' holds true today as it did then. On the scientific side, Europe was falling further behind."

"Am I rambling, Celine?"

"Just a little, sweetheart, you lost me there. I am happy to listen. You've always been like that. It all makes perfect sense to those who want to listen and confirm that their thinking had been right all along, don't worry you're all there."

Rupentine tears up.

"There is no reason for crying now, you personally cannot do anything about that. Let me get you some more coffee but no brownies. They are not good for your waistline, and you can't do much about

that either," she added with a touch of humor.

Frank smiles back, almost to tell her that he is following her loving parody all the way.

"I leave the big decisions to you, darling," says Frank with a cheeky smile.

"You see, it's the Youth of America who got me the Presidency. Many of whom are going to lead a life in a wasteland of gimmicky expensive toys - toys which in many ways enabled them to get our Climate message across, indeed, as I said, they got me the Presidency. This thought alone tears me apart and I must add, I feel so crucified at times."

"Stop thinking, stop talking for a while and enjoy your coffee," snaps Celine who looks a little impatient but more than loving.

"Can I continue to listen at least, or was that the end of the chapter," asks Frank.

"There is more, but not till I've finished my coffee," replies Celine.

"God, my brains are going, but exactly where, I don't know," says Frank.

"THE ASIAN MATHEMATICAL mind of many was wired by nature to achieve nothing

less than 100. They were blessed with this intelligence and their parents felt the need to exploit this gift to the hilt. Thousands of young kids in mainland China were using these high-powered computers which looked like gimmicky iPhones to enrich themselves with knowledge that would fuel their future careers.'

'In a diametrically opposite environment, thousands of our teenagers, and I must say Chinese kids included, were streaming silly pictures and Tik Tokkers doing their stuff. In the process, becoming affluent overnight thus encouraging armies of young kids to follow in the same profession aspiring for dreams of wealth which appeared easy enough and within their grasp by flashing their tits and popping their asses...'

"Frank, you cannot have this, better change the words, they are rather crude and rude."

"You think so? That's nothing; you should see all the smut floating on the Internet. But you are right, it is very unbecoming of me to use such language. Of late, my lexicon standards have dropped rather dramatically, maybe it comes with age, so what do you suggest?"

“How about exhibiting their bodies inappropriately, or maybe better, appearing in suggestive poses?”

“Frank, Frank are you there? Tik Tokkers? God, he’s asleep again.”

“Oh yeah, I guess my clock is becoming more audible; tick, tock, tick, tock. I find the material in my book so interesting I can’t help but fall asleep ... ha, ha, ha ... Was I really falling asleep, Celine?”

“You were indeed asleep, Frank! It’s that fall off the horse in Vegas. It messed you up a little, but it’s still good to see that you have retained your sense of humor,” replies Celine.

“An accidental hero almost became an accidental zero ... ha ha ha.”

Celine couldn’t help but giggle and says, “I wish your advertising guru Wendell were here to listen to your witty but corny lines. Let’s continue... this is the Tik Tokkers piece.”

‘... aspiring for dreams of wealth which seemed easy enough to achieve *by appearing in suggestive poses*, firing texts littered with spelling mistakes and emojis as if it were in a fingers-flicking speed test. Incidentally this is now accepted and classed as cool – the more spelling

mistakes, the more innovative. It seems to be the prevailing thought amongst these youngsters.'

"By the way Frank, these sentences are somewhat long. Of course, they are easily handled and mastered by acerbic readers, but you may be limiting your readership, I think. Probably to the ones who already share your views."

"Yeah, I have had some thoughts on that but to answer your question... too late for that, Honey, if they come this far in their reading, it will be far too late to turn back. They will go to the end."

"Are you still awake, Frank?... okay? I will continue."

"Yeah, still with you, listening with my eyes open but ears closed - trance? I haven't had one of them for a while. I must be getting better. Huh."

'So, Governments in Europe, and with the help and hindrance of the European Union Central Government, passed several laws. These have to do primarily with the manufacturing of clothing, building materials, and general supplies. They limit any country outside the block from acquiring more than 25% foothold in the market. They became commonly known as 'Supply Chain Dependency

Laws'. Electronics in particular were limited to a maximum of 10%. This was really Europe's technology backyard.'

'I may not agree with most things that he's done, but he was the first to ramp up the pressure, so give credit when credit is due. What I have described above was encouraged and started by the president of four administrations ago as well as a number of other things he did. As you know, I don't like to mention politicians by name. One might say there is good and bad in all of us, hopefully my side has more good than bad. There is a big difference from what's bad to what's evil but I am digressing a little even while writing these lines.'

'Many a European company saw this as a brake on their future business ambitions but let us not forget the heavy foreign influence in their boardrooms, a good enough motive to keep pushing against these newly enacted laws. These leaders of business were told future wars would be avoided by keeping their vessels on an even keel, by keeping their blueprints safely where they belong and by keeping away from subcontracting to cheap labor overseas. End of Story.'

‘In the meantime, many industrial processes were turning towards Africa which needed big boosts to its economies. But none of the African nations came anywhere close to China’s gargantuan infrastructure or had any ambitions even coming anywhere close. It is important to remind ourselves that the total population on the African continent is 300 million short of that of China. Irrespective, South Africa, Egypt and other countries benefited from the aftermath of war.’

‘We just hope that the U.S., United Kingdom and our European partners will grasp the New Dawn, and grow organically and innovatively through the skills that had been developed over centuries. In the process and in search for the common good we will partner with other less traditionally friendly countries even ones that we have been to war with. Suffice to say that we should look at Europe and learn from the past.

Hundreds of wars had been fought in the past and millions of lives lost, but when peace finally descended, then Europe prospered. They just need to get back on track.’

“Frank, that was the end of your chapter ‘Reflections – The Rape of Europe’ with two capital ‘R’s’.”

“Oh, remind me Celine, I must change the name of this chapter in the Table of Contents. It should have the word ‘Reflection’ at the start. On second thoughts, a shorter name is a better punch line.”

“Frank, it is a thought-provoking chapter and detailed enough even after you have taken out half of its original content. You will get plenty of acclaim and needless to say, a fair amount of backlash especially from individuals whose love for their pockets run deeper than the love for their country.”

“Celine, these thoughts continue to consume me and one cannot ignore a market of 1.5 billion people. Selling a product is one thing, but selling the whole shop is another.”

“I will include this chapter exactly as it now is, the way you have read it, without any whitewashing or apologizing to anyone or anybody. I do not expect to get the ‘China Friendship Award’ bestowed upon me. I only want to be judged by my own people. And that’s my way of doing things.”

“Oh, by the way, moving on to a different subject, and I have mentioned this before. I would like to transport myself back to Rupentino, a little village outside Rome but now it cannot even be located, not even on Google. Two hundred years ago, all my people migrated to the United States and South America.”

“Frank, it’s time for your rest.”

“I was going to say, I lived a dream. It truly shows that America is the land of dreams. From humble Rupentino to the White House.”

“It’s time for my nap, Celine. Thank you, I couldn’t have gone through all that without your help.”

Celine looks at him with understanding and thanks him for the compliment.

Rupentine points at his old record player; Celine gets up and positions the stylus on the correct track. The LP record had become a permanent fixture on the turntable; she then motions to his aides who help him to his feet.

He takes a salute to *“HAIL TO THE CHIEF.”*

Chapter 26

Rupentine – A montage of transformation.

26

Irrespective of his pain and suffering, Frank is determined to complete his memoirs, which would include the latest horse-riding nasty incident. Inside, he felt he was racing against time.

Frank now looks increasingly tired, feeble, indecisive and furthermore, appears confused. He keeps looking at a montage of pictures already set in place. In his right hand he holds a few more photographs.

“What to include and what to omit? Is that what’s worrying you, darling?”

Frank nods. He passes the montage artwork to Celine without uttering a word.

“Okay, let’s see what you have included here.”

‘Bipolar to Balanced – Dedicated to the love of my life – my wife, Celine.’

“Oh, and three heart emojis. That is such a nice introduction Frank, so sweet.” She leans over and kisses him.

“Nice shots. This must be in Australia – Aborigines.”

“And now we’re looking at you in Nevada, wandering with a rubbish bag on your back.”

“Wow, where did you get this next picture from? Aliens’ faces - mentioned when you were in a trance; I hope you have not broken any copyright laws.”

Frank smiles.

“Aha... even a picture of me as the First Lady.”

“This one must have been *The Tribune* with that cruel and unflattering Coke headline, ‘*Rupentine cannot sell a bottle of Coke to a man dying of thirst in the desert.*’ That headline was vicious.”

“Complejo Deportivo, that’s when you announced you were running.”

“Darling, please pass me my wine.”

Frank reaches for the glass and holds it in his shaking hand; she takes it from him and starts to well up. Then she recomposes herself and continues.

“Kids cleaning, this must have been before the inauguration. Frank, maybe I can change the sequence of the pictures a little, do you agree?”

Frank nods.

“Aha, here we go... The most prestigious office in the world - the Oval Office.”

“This one... with the British Prime Minister, Tom Hawkins.”

“The new city in Sukopia; then, moving on... to your favorite second country, England; a great shot of Blenheim Castle from the air; and then this one, shaking hands with Vladimir Volkov.”

“Now, back to Australia, ‘Lest we Forget.’ That line generated a lot of interest.”

“Walter and Lydia Ferraro, what a nice couple.”

“And as you promised Frank, the absolute jewel - Peace in the Middle East - the Chequers Quartet - Yourself, Tom

Hawkins, David Levy and Ahmed Hadid.”

“This is indeed a story about your remarkable transformation.”

“Remember? I was dead against that mission, but you insisted. I guess I am honored to say I was absolutely wrong.”

Frank nods and humbly acknowledges the comment.

“I remember you telling me before we both signed the papers to run. I was with you in the Recovery Room in the Surgical Unit. These were exactly your words, ‘I never expect the worst ... and I always get the best.’”

Suddenly there is a little sparkle in Frank’s eyes. He smiles and nods.

“This one empty space is for Jordi.”

Frank nods.

“So, I will re-position a few shots. Can I do that?”

Frank nods again.

“There, that looks better.”

She passes him the montage; his head bobs up and down to indicate approval. His index finger points at the blank space.

“Yes, that spot is for Jordi. He is

sending me his latest picture. By the way, this short intel came in last night, 'U.S. Intel. Koreans and Chinese suspected terrorists arrested in Stockholm while boarding a flight for the U.S. and Russia.'"

Rupentine wells up, "Hmm."

It was to be the last word, more appropriately, described as the last sound that Celine heard from her beloved husband.

He passes, two days later, on December 1st 2035. He was 68 years old.

It is an opportunity for a few in attendance at the Service, to catch up albeit on such a sad occasion.

Herman and Jeremiah had not seen Celine for a long time. She talks about the last few months, in particular, the days following the horse-riding accident in Las Vegas, and how Frank deteriorated so swiftly.

As always, Maria is by Celine's side, and is delighted to see the two NIFAI founders, it gives her the opportunity to catch up with how they were doing.

They were aware that she got married and now lives on a ranch in Montana with her husband Hank and her son Carlito, who is by her side.

Jeremiah decides to ask a question, even if it could have appeared to be somewhat inappropriate at the time. "Maria, we never had the opportunity to meet Hank. We are very much aware of the service that he has given to this Country and in particular in saving Frank's and Celine's life. And of course, he is the recipient of the highest Honour in the Land. But we would surely like to meet him at the first opportunity."

All of a sudden – silence.

Then Maria continues, "All is fine between us, we're happy, but to be honest, I don't know where Hank is. He did say his private work is now a closed book, and I believe that. He also said that his service to this Country is now concluded, but you yourself do understand about the powers of persuasion. His last communication to me was in the form of a text message, 'Darling don't worry about me, I am fine. Will see you soon. Hank.' Personally, I suspect he is overseas on another secret mission."

Walter Ferraro reads the final words as Frank is laid to rest.

"It is unfortunate that Frank Rupentine passed soon after being nominated for the

Nobel Peace Prize.”

He pauses.

“The President’s request was to read his last prayer which is now inscribed in stone. ‘Dear Lord, forgive me, for I have sinned. Many times I have found myself down the wrong path ... forgiving, loving and praying for our enemies is Christ-like. Being gracious, merciful to others and showing compassion are my deep-rooted beliefs. Thank you, Lord.’”

Milton Meredith, Thomas Brown, Jack Steiner, Roy Stennings, State and Federal politicians are in attendance. Next to Celine is her son Jordi. Maria Ramos, now visibly pregnant, stands next to her son Carlito.

Herman and Jeremiah stand next to each other, heads bowed in silence.

Both reflect on their close relationship they had with this great man ... a man who they had guided to become one of the greatest U.S. presidents ever.

This feat was achieved by following the principles set by Nicola di Fermi’s famous Latin words, ‘Sumus Omnes Pares’ and ‘Finis Mediis Iustificat.’

These two shining lights, have now become two beacons of hope. How would

they inspire them in the years to come? How would this acquired-wisdom help them achieve their noble objectives to overcome any hurdles, that may be put in their way?

Most importantly, how would they strive to pursue their goals in the most noble way, without sacrificing any moral principles that guided Frank Rupentine during his years in Office.

Father Murphy concludes the service and blesses the coffin as it is gently lowered into the crypt.

“In certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our President Frank Rupentine and we commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Amen.”

END